

dreaming of days of a different life

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dreaming of days of a different life

by [wizardwiles](#)

Summary

“What do you want from me?”

George didn't have time to unpack all the connotations of the question, not when Dream was glaring down at him expectantly, his jaw locked and his shoulder squared and his eyes flickering with something fierce.

“Will you have tea with me? I know you don't like coffee,” George asked, hating how meek he sounded.

Dream averted his gaze, his grip visibly tightening on the horse's reins, and said nothing.

“Please. One last act of hospitality,” George forced a crooked smile, “For old time's sake?”

Dream's lips quirked ever-so-slightly as he nodded and slid off his horse. Almost inaudibly, he muttered, “I've never been good at saying no to you,”

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Western au in which George has stumbled upon a crossroads; he has to decide between the life he's always known, and the life he never thought he'd want.

Notes

I'm finally publishing part 3 over 4 months after part 2. What the fuck.

Chapter 1 picks up right where Part 2 left off. Chapter 1 is from Dream's POV! The rest will be from George's :)

The work title is from Midnight Cowboy by Surf Curse.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

regicide

“Thanks, bastard,”

That's all he had to say. Six months for two words.

Dream wasn't sure if he should laugh or cry, but he was presently doing the latter as George's shrinking figure blurred into the horizon line. George didn't even have the decency to look regretful, he had left with a smile. *Dream* was the disaster, Dream was the one sobbing into his own hand like a bitch on the outskirts of a town full of people he didn't know. Dream was the one who was left behind.

He didn't even know what to do with himself, not a first. When were you supposed to stop crying? Are you supposed to cry in the first place? When he got the urge to throw something, he acted on impulse, shattering the bottle of bourbon he had bought only hours before. It was a waste, but the loud cracking sound followed by the splintering of glass was momentarily satisfying.

Distantly, Dream scolded himself for throwing a temper tantrum, over *a man* no less, but at the same time he couldn't care less about his dignity. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't stay and watch forever. He gathered his things, mounted his horse, and found a barn to crash in for the night.

He woke up in the thick of the afternoon, half expecting for a newly twenty-three year old George to be wrapped in his embrace. It had been a long time since Dream knew the cold of sleeping alone. *Pathetic.*

He wanted to slam his head into a wall, rip out his hair, *anything* to stop thinking like a pathetic idiot, but all he could do right now was light up a cigarette. He just wanted to bury himself six feet under ground and wait to feel better again.

Dream forced himself out of the stranger's barn, and went to find his horse. Distantly, he knew he had things to do today. He had people to meet, he didn't have a dime to his name, and he was out of food, and more importantly, alcohol and cigarettes. Now was not the time for mourning, now was the time for him to reprise his role as the lonesome gunslinger.

It didn't feel right, living as he did before George. It was so strange how everybody he interacted with didn't even know that the man he's been in love with for six months left him twelve hours prior. Dream didn't know what he was expecting, it was foolish to expect the Earth to stop rotating on its axis because he had his stupid heart broken.

Dream shoehorned himself back into his usual routine, whatever that meant. He did what he had to, but he felt petulant and irascible all the time, like a child stuck in a perpetual tantrum. Suddenly, the pandemonium of his usual life wasn't as pleasant alone. It was like trying to wear boots that were too small, everything felt so suffocating, yet oddly empty.

It had been exactly two weeks since George left when Dream felt like he got a semblance of a grip again, that was, until he was alone in an inn, burning cigarette holes on the shitty mattress and taking sips from stolen bourbon when it hit him, that that's what he'd been drinking when George left, down to the brand.

Dream never thought he'd have to cover his mouth from how hard he was crying, but there's a first time for everything.

Dream couldn't recall a time he had ever felt so vulnerable, *sopathetic*, and he despised himself for becoming a shell of his former self. He was supposed to be a hardened criminal, a gunslinger with the bark of a coyote and the bite of a javelina, but he was worked up over some guy who left without looking back.

Dream could feel his heart beating in his chest as he forced himself to sleep that night. It ached.

Hours passed, and those hours became days, and those days became weeks, and those weeks became months. For a long time, Dream walked on eggshells in his own mind, and any innocuous thing would set him off, but he got a grip on himself eventually. He didn't just wake up one morning and feel right again, he began healing slowly, over time. He distracted himself with friends and gambling and crime, and although his life was far from perfect, it was functional.

Dream considered going back for George, because maybe if he was just delusional enough, he could convince George that he was worth it. It wouldn't have been hard to find him. Sure, his shitty little town wasn't on most maps, but Dream committed the location to memory a long time ago. Regardless of whether or not Dream wanted to, he knew he never would. It was best to stop while he was ahead. He knew it'd be better to never see George again than to convince him to come back, only to disappoint him for the second time.

Still, to be seen as indispensable by just one person would have been enough for Dream's entire life, and after getting a sliver of that with George, he knew he was helplessly addicted. He'd never get over it.

Dream let George slip from his mind, slowly but surely, retreating into the corners of his consciousness until he only existed in his nightmares and occasional midnight hysteria. He wasn't a domineering force in Dream's head anymore, he wasn't the weight on his chest, the iron hand gripping his heart. Dream was able to strike deals, pick up bounties, sojourn, and return to his routine as usual. George was merely the shadow of a phantom long forgotten, an acrid memory to reflect on from time to time, and nothing more.

Dream's past had a bad habit of haunting him.

He walked into the tavern on a perfectly average November first, a day that already felt off for a reason he chose not to think about. The doors creaked open, Dream entered, and was met with a few spare glances and a handful of tipped hats. The chill from outdoors seeped into the dimly-lit room, gnawing at Dream through his faded green coat, but the warmth from within was quick to seize him. Dream contemplated leaving, based on a few unkind glances thrown in his direction, but he had nowhere to spend the night, the sun was setting, and desert nights were unforgiving. He elected to stay.

He took a seat in a far corner of the bar a few seats down from another man, somewhere remote, somewhere he could cloister himself away for a few hours without too many questions. The establishment was underwhelmingly quiet tonight, save for the woman with a guitar performing in the opposite corner, hardly drowned out by patrons with skittish eyes muttering to one another in low tones. Dream felt like his bandana was choking him, suffocated under their stares, but he forced himself to remain.

The man a few seats down shifted in his seat, and Dream could've sworn he saw him glance down at him.

"Good evening, Dream,"

Dream was immediately caught off-guard by the man's baritone voice. It was on the verge of

recognizable, but Dream couldn't quite place it. It was until he looked over and was met with the man's bored expression and wrathful eyes that Dream realized.

"So that's what you look like without the mask, Techno?" Dream implored, "I see why you kept the damn thing on for so long now,"

Techno rolled his eyes, "How kind,"

Dream glared at him for a long moment. It was truthfully the first time he had seen Techno's uncovered face, and it was underwhelming. He wasn't sure what he was expecting. Techno was an average looking man, with pale skin juxtaposing hair almost as dark as the circles under his eyes. He stared straight forward, sparing Dream the occasional glance, but never looking directly at him, as though he was too painfully above him. Even dethroned, he was pompous as ever.

"Do *they* ," Dream gestured to the patrons, "know who you are?"

"Maybe they do. Maybe they don't. I don't really care either way," Techno shrugged, "Hardly matters,"

"Since when did you become such a wise guy?"

Techno glared at Dream out of the corner of his eyes, the murky brown irises glinting in the lantern light, "Since you destroyed my reputation and ran me out of town two summers ago,"

Dream ground his teeth together, his jaw tight, "Is that why you're here, then? To see me?"

"I see you're still a presumptuous egomaniac," Techno said impertinently.

Dream stared directly at him, "I learned from the best,"

Techno gave a small smile at that, nodded, and took a sip of his mostly-full glass, swirling with an amber-colored liquid.

"If you're not here for me, then why the hell are you here?"

"Nostalgia. A decent drink. Entertainment," He muttered into the glass, "I dunno, Dream, why are *you* here?"

"I have the right,"

"Same as me,"

Dream narrowed his eyes, "I'm not interested in any fights you're trying to pick,"

"I see you're as temperamental as ever," Techno took a sip, "Who said I was picking a fight?,"

"Fuck off," Dream barked. It was a knee-jerk reaction, an immature one at that, and Dream knew it - problem is, he had nothing else to say.

Techno had the audacity to smile, but his eyes were void of kindness, "Not as sharp as you used to be, eh? Maybe the rumors *are* true,"

"Pardon?"

"Word around town is that you've been slipping, Dream,"

Coldness spiked through Dream's body, infecting his bloodstream. *Panic*. "Says who? And why?"

Techno made a face of distaste, " *Now* you're eager to talk to me?"

"Please. Just tell me," Dream's voice shook like a leaf in a tempestuous breeze. He hated this, all of it - being at Techno's mercy, feeling so fragile.

"The folks who used to be your friends-"

"I never had friends,"

Techno rolled his eyes, "Whatever, the point is every man with a name known around these parts can't keep yours out of their mouth. They say you're all bark and no bite these days. You're getting lazy with your work, not getting mixed up with the law like you used to,"

Dream scoffed, "People are talking shit because I've decided to lay low?"

"That's bullshit, and we both know it," Techno hissed, looking directly at the other man, "You're not 'laying low' as much as you're just letting yourself wither away, and it doesn't take a learned man to notice,"

Dream swallowed thickly. He felt faint, as though all his blood had been drained out of him. Empty. "What else are people saying about me?"

"They noticed you're solo now. Think your so-called 'downfall' has something to do with that," Techno waved a dismissive hand, "Still, don't worry, *mighty king*, your reputation mostly precedes you. A lot of folks still know your name and revere the ground you walk on. It's just a few stray rumors,"

"What's your point?"

"No point, just observation," Techno cocked his head ever so slightly, "Speaking of going solo, where *is* that associate of yours?"

Dream ground his teeth, "Not around,"

"Not around?"

"More or less," Dream tried to keep his tone level, "but that doesn't concern you,"

"No, it doesn't. But it's awfully fun to talk about,"

They sat in silence for a long moment. Techno ordered another drink for himself. Dream didn't touch his own. He couldn't help but feel as though everyone within the bar was watching, stalking him with hungry eyes, waiting to pounce or gleefully watch as another took the bait.

Dream sighed, and leaned into his own hand. He was so incredibly tired. "I don't know what to do,"

Upon Dream's words, Techno stilled, and looked at him. His expression changed, his eyes morphed into a holder for something even more despicable than contempt: pity. Dream dropped his gaze, and felt stupid for even saying it. He wanted to put his head through a wall.

Suddenly, a rambunctious boy with blonde hair and dirt on his face kicked the door open, and fired a round into the ceiling. The patrons of the bar stilled. Over the sound of his gunfire, Dream could barely make out some of his words - something about the Napoleon of the west, about injustice,

and tyranny. Dream couldn't focus on what he was saying, or what it mattered - he couldn't stop thinking about the familiarity of the accent.

After the sixth bullet, the boy lowered his gun. Loud, clear, and with clearly feigned confidence, he spoke, "Where is Dream?"

Every individual in the bar turned to him immediately, their emaciated glares boring into him. From beside him, Techno snickered, and shook his head sadly. "You're in for it now, partner,"

The bar was silent, save for the sound of the boy stumbling over his too-large boots while sauntering over. Dream thought something about him was familiar, maybe the way his voice wavered when he spoke, or the angry expression on his face.

Dream narrowed his eyes, taken aback by the raw hatred in the young man's. "Who might you be?"

"I'm the man who's going to end your life," The boy said the words mechanically, as though he rehearsed them dozens of times on the way here. He spoke too vociferously and with too little sincerity, his faux confidence fitting him awkwardly, like a hand-me-down shirt that was a little too large. Up close, Dream saw the youth in this kid's face, the way his cheeks hollowed out from hunger, but he looked far from aged. *God, he looks familiar.*

"Is that so?"

The boy nodded, "This day will be your last,"

Dream wanted to laugh in his face and give him a few pennies for candy. Is this how he sounded when he was a teenager? So obsessed with his own pride, clumsily stuttering out his pre-prepared one-liners in hopes to intimidate?

Dream's eyes travelled past the boy's face, and he noticed a few men crowding around the door. He recognized them, even at a distance - He couldn't miss Phil's bright blonde hair, or the way Wilbur Soot's eyes erratically scoured the room. This was Tommy, the same teenager Wilbur was mentoring a few years ago. Was Tommy there at the infamous game of poker? How long ago was that - how old even was he?

Was Wilbur forcing him to duel Dream? Was this some sort of rite of passage?

Quietly, Dream said, "Tommy, you don't have to do this-"

"I want to," he declared and clamored to draw his gun. He held it as though it was made of a hot coal, it fit awkwardly in his hand. His hands shook, but the resolve in his expression made his intentions crystal clear. "Duel me, you green bastard,"

If you had asked Dream why he accepted the duel that day, he couldn't tell you.

Everyone's eyes were on him, so many prying eyes. In a blur, Dream was outside, he was drawing his gun, he noticed it wasn't loaded but didn't reach for his bullets, he closed the hollow chamber and took his place in the dirt road. Dream knew he wasn't going to shoot this kid, not before hell froze over. He couldn't forgive himself for a lot of things, no reason to add to the list. Still, he felt sick.

He went through the motions absently. His back was against Tommy's, they were taking ten paces, Dream turned on his heel. He didn't even manage to aim his unloaded gun before Tommy fired.

He didn't miss.

How quickly the predator becomes prey .

He knew this sensation all too well, the incomprehensible burning of a bullet tearing through skin and muscle, splitting organs, blood seeping through the perforation. Dream's clothes embraced him as the red warmth seeped through. His head didn't even hurt as it crashed against the dirt road. He smiled at the sky as the sun grew brighter, blurring into the blue. He relished the familiarity of this feeling.

Tommy had shot with a marksman's ability and with a sort of hatred Dream knew would corrupt him, and make him cruel. He didn't even have the decency to look regretful as he was ushered away by his older associates, who plucked the gun from his hand and told him not to look at the soon-to-be-corpse. *Me.*

Dream knew that dozens were crowded around to watch his death - it was a spectacle. Someone sounding as if they were standing a mile away commented, "It would have been good for that man if he were never born." Dream was inclined to agree.

He thought of his enemies, Techno and the rest of his comrades. He thought of his friends, and prayed they wouldn't miss him. He thought of his family, long abandoned, and hoped they would never find out what happened to him. He thought of a sheriff's badge, of scarred hands and dark hair and fancy clothes.

Dream couldn't stop his thoughts from flooding into his mind, and he didn't bother trying to decipher them. Streams of thought become an incomprehensible, tempestuous ocean rattling his skull.

I hope he still hates me. I hope he never misses me. I hope he knows what happened to me, and I hope he doesn't care.

I hope he never knows how much I loved him.

Dream stared blankly at the sky. He couldn't bring himself to feel regret, he had had so many brushes with death, at this point it felt more like he was greeting an old friend rather than meeting a stranger. He was dying with a bullet in his side, in a nameless town, surrounded by people he didn't like or even know. He was king, and this was regicide. This was *his* regicide.

Ain't that just the way

Dream closed his eyes, and patiently waited.

Needless to say, he was rather surprised when he woke up the next morning.

When the surprise subsided, the confusion took its place, and when he realized he didn't care *how* he was alive, just that he *was*, he grew angry.

He shot upright and immediately regretted it, crying out as pain sliced through his side. He laid back down on the wooden ground in some house he'd never been in. Gritting his teeth and squeezing the tears out of his eyes, he ran a hand over his torso. He flinched as he found stitches precariously holding together a fresh wound - a bullet wound. He had been shot yesterday. Or was it multiple days ago? Or had it only been a few hours?

I'm alive.

Goddamn it.

"You're awake," A deep, monotone voice commented from the corner of the room. Dream opened his eyes, although his bleary vision did nothing to help him but a face to the voice.

Dream panicked, realizing there was another person present. He was vulnerable and, *shit*, face was uncovered, and slapped a hand over his mouth. He felt exposed.

"Sorry about your bandana. I kind of had to remove it, so you could breathe more easily,"

"Who-?" Dream cut himself off. His voice hoarse. "Techno?"

"The one and only," Dream heard the smirk in his tone.

The confusion overwhelmed his anger once again. "Why, of all people, did *you* save me? What are you playing at?"

There was a chuckle. "You know, Dream, a 'thank you' would've been nice, but I suppose neither of us have been a fan of formalities,"

Dream shook his head. He wasn't thankful, far from it. The first time he was shot, he lived because he was lucky. Now, he lived because someone else was spiteful. *How many times do I have to be filled with bullets and stitched together like some sort of ragdoll before I'm allowed to die?*

"Techno, tell me why," Dream barely managed, "Why didn't you let me die?"

"It wasn't the right time,"

Dream would've punched him if he had the energy to get off the ground. "What do you want from me? Money? Property? My head on a stake?"

"Don't jump a gift horse in the mouth," Techno spoke slowly and sternly, "I have no quarrel with you, so consider this amnesty, of sorts,"

"If you're looking for answers or information, you won't get any. I don't have to explain anything to you,"

"And I'm not asking you to,"

Dream opened his eyes, and stared at the low wooden ceiling overhead. "After everything I've done to you, you chose to save me? For nothing in return? Are you insane?"

"It's not like I'm completely innocent here," Techno countered, "We both have commit enough blasphemy for one hundred lifetimes,"

"You could've let me die. You wouldn't have been responsible,"

"No, I wouldn't have been. But maybe," Techno sighed, and his tone shifted to something harrowed lacking his usual lavish posturing. "I just felt sorry for you,"

Dream didn't believe him. There was silence.

"You know, you were talking when you were bleeding out," Techno commented absently, "The whole way here, you kept babbling about someone,"

Dream imagined Techno plucking him off the ground, struggling to get a grip on Dream's limp body. He imagined himself bleeding out, staining Techno's white shirt as he struggled to keep Dream upright on a horse. He imagined Techno riding fast, with one hand on the reins, the other

pressing down on his wound with one hand, desperately trying to stop the blood loss. He imagined using his last clutches on life to say his final words, a final testimonial only Techno would hear. Maybe it was more akin to the mindless babbling of a desperate man. Either way, Dream had a sick feeling he already knew what he said.

Regardless, he sat up again, ignoring the splitting pain in his torso. He whipped around to face Techno and was greeted by his outlined silhouette by the sunlight streaming in from the blinds. When Dream's vision cleared, he noticed the other man was sitting in a handmade, shoddy-looking chair wearing casual clothes. Dried blood crested his cheek, and ever darker circles hung under his eyes in half-crescents. He seemingly shucked both the royal garbs and his prestige.

"What did I say?" Dream asked slowly, looking up at Techno.

A beat. "George,"

Of course.

Techno continued, "I couldn't really make out most of what you said, except that name,"

Dream was humiliated beyond humiliation, this was mortifying to the highest degree. He was convinced he had gotten over him, and yet thought of George when he was dying, tormented by the ghost of something, *someone* he could never have.

"Why did you really save me, Techno? I know charity work isn't in your priorities," Dream laid back down, having lost all desire to look at Techno's pitying expression for another second. "We're supposed to be enemies,"

"Friend and foe are merely two sides of the same coin,"

"How wise," Dream hoped the sarcasm translated through his scratchy voice.

Silence blanketed the room.

Techno spoke first. "You want to leave the west, don't you?"

"I don't understand,"

"You lived through your prime. You had the world in your hands, or that's why it felt like, right? But this place is a machine, just as much like the ones on the east coast or in London. The badlands will chew you up and spit you out a broken man. And now, you're desperate to escape,"

Feeling like he was fourteen again, Dream huffed in indignance. "How would you know how I feel?"

"Because I lived through it," Techno said it bitterly, as though he wanted Dream to know he blamed him for it, "Besides, you look like you've been living with your toe on the trigger for weeks,"

Dream snickered for a brief moment, then dropped the smile. Everything hit him at once. He was laying on the floor of some mysterious building with a man who he hated, and still probably does. The word around town had probably spread that he died. He had nowhere to reside. He was nobody.

"What now, Techno?"

“Leave,” Techno replied simply, “Take what you need, and go somewhere far away,”

“I’m not going east,”

“Then go to California. Or go North. Whatever you do, you can’t stay here any longer,”

Dream never thought he’d run away again. Maybe he really was turning into his fourteen year-old self, “I can’t leave. Not yet,”

“Why not?”

Not without him . Dream just shook his head. “I need to make things right with someone,”

“George,” Techno said the name as though it were a fact, not a question.

Dream nodded. “Yeah. Him,”

“Then go to him. What’ve you got to lose?”

Everything. Nothing . “I don’t know. I don’t think I can face him again. It would’ve been easier to just die,” Dream laughed dryly, “Would’ve saved me a lot of trouble, that’s for damn sure,”

“I know it would’ve,” Techno’s voice almost resembled something understanding, “But that’s just how it is on this bitch of an Earth,”

Techno stood from his chair, the floorboards creaking underfoot. His head came into Dream’s field of vision as he leaned over. “You can rest for the rest of the day. I’ll see you out tomorrow,”

Techno stepped over Dream. He placed a small tin of water next to him on the ground. Then, there were footsteps, then the creak of a door. The steps paused.

Dream brought his hands to his face. “Then what?”

“You decide from there,” Techno said, closed the door, and disappeared.

What a terrifying, appalling sentiment.

Dream laid awake on the floor for a few hours, until the room darkened at dusk. He was submerged into a restless sleep, his whole body aching and sweating through the night as his side throbbed painfully. Even worse than the physical torture were his half-lucid nightmares, where he saw flashes of friends he once had, faces of people he once loved.

When he awoke, he was deeply uncomfortable and not at all ready to leave, but he’d rather die than ask Techno to stay another night when he shoved fresh clothes in Dream’s arms that morning. After he put on Techno’s clothes, Dream got his first good look at the room he had passed out in.

The room was apparently his bedroom, with a rickety, twin size mattress in the corner, a nightstand littered with gold jewelry, and a small bookshelf filled with an abundance of books about politics with titles Dream could barely comprehend. Through the crooked windows, Dream saw a meagre field of tilled soil, absent of any crops. The whole room felt stale and smelled of dust. It was hard to believe this was somewhere Techno would voluntarily live. It was underwhelming, it didn’t match his decadence, his sumptuousness.

Dream wandered out of the room, treading lightly into a slightly larger room, which seemed to be Techno’s kitchen. He sat at a small, round table, across from a tin of coffee and some papers. Dream wordlessly sat across from him, bracing his hand against the table as he did so. Techno

watched like a hawk as he took a sip of his coffee, nose scrunching and brow furrowing at the flavor.

“Do you dislike it?” Techno asked calmly, blankly.

“No,” Dream lied. Techno blinked, “To be honest, I don’t like coffee in general,”

Techno raised an eyebrow, “I had assumed, since there were some coffee beans in your satchel-”

“Uh, he - George liked it,” Dream stammered, flinching in anticipation of Techno’s censure.

Techno merely nodded wistfully, “So you kept it just in case?”

Dream downed the coffee, ignoring the way the boiling water and flat flavor scorched his tongue. He stood abruptly, “Should I be on my way?”

Techno motioned for him to sit down. “Not yet. I have something for you,”

He motioned to the papers in front of Dream, rife with legal jargon he couldn’t make out in his hazy state. He understood it was about some sort of property.

“What is this?”

“Are you unlettered?” Techno’s expression softened after his rebuke, “If you’re willing to take it, I want you to have my property in California,”

Dream shook his head, pushing the papers across the table, “Techno, I can’t-”

“You can and you will,” He urged, pressing his hand down on the small pile, shoving it back at Dream.

“You deserve this more than I do,” Dream protested, “I should at least pay you some amount for it-”

“Then pay me. I don’t care. But I know that you need this more than me, and you should take it. I’m not moving out, at least not any time soon,” His eyes hardened, “I wasn’t born in the west, but I know I’m going to die here. Things can be different for you,”

"Why me," Dream shook his head, "We're not even friends-"

"Sure we are," Techno insisted, and gestured to the room, "You've been a guest in my house, eaten my food, and drank of my drink. We're comrades, and believe it or not, I am capable of being a generous man to those I think deserve it. And you, my friend... you deserve it,"

Dream shook his head. "I don't want to be indebted to you,"

"I expect nothing in return. Consider this a gift,"

Dream knew he should be on his hands and knees thanking Techno, worshipping the ground he works on. He couldn't bring himself to express gratitude, only confusion and resentment. Why accept a gift he so clearly did not deserve?

Dream protested, “This is absurd - I can’t just *leave* ,”

“Sure you can,”

“You expect me to just take these papers and haul ass to California?” Dream asked incredulously.

“What else *can* you do, Dream?”

The words sent Dream’s stomach into the ground. He felt like he was sinking. He snatched the papers and haphazardly shoved them in his satchel as Techno’s words from yesterday echoed in his mind: don’t jump a gift horse in the mouth. Just as he moved to stand up from the table, Techno interrupted him once more.

“Dream, I know the kid who shot you,” For once, Techno looked small, unsure of himself, “Him and I share blood. I didn’t want your life to be on his hands,”

Dream blinked once, twice, and then he understood. “You’re family?” - Techno nodded - “What is he, then, your son?”

Techno laughed at that genuinely, in a way that was void of condescension, “God, no, we’re brothers, well, half brothers. Same father,”

Dream nodded slowly. He had learned so much today, so much about himself, the world at large - Techno apparently having a brother was just another absurd fact to add to the ever-growing list.

Dream collected his belongings - not that there was much to collect - and made his way to the door. Techno was idle the entire time, save for his eyes following Dream as he ambled throughout the small space.

Techno showed Dream out, and they stood in pregnant silence on the rickety patio, staring into the vastness of the field ahead. The sun shone brightly overhead as the tall grass rippled into waves until the sky met the horizon line, not interrupted by so much as a tree for miles. Dream wondered how or why Techno came to live here, and why he even bothered hauling Dream out here just to kick him out again.

“If you ride straight ahead you should find a city by sundown,” Techno said, “And ride slow - it’ll hurt like a bitch if those stitches come undone,”

Sometimes, it’s unclear when your life is about to change forever, and you’re unable to see when one thing ends and another begins - you don’t even realize until it’s over. Last November was one of those times for Dream. This was not; it was clear as day that this was some sort of ultimatum.

Techno tipped his hat to him. “I never thought I’d say this, but it’s been a pleasure Dream,”

There were so many things Dream wanted to ask. He wanted to know why Techno had a change of heart, what he’s been doing since Dream stripped him of his reputation, but now wasn’t the time to ask. Knowing that there would never be a right time to ask was saddening to Dream, but nonetheless, he also knew he couldn’t stay forever.

Dream turned to Techno, said, “Thanks for everything,” tipped his hat, and left.

Dream took Techno’s extra horse, rode straight ahead, until Techno’s small cabin disappeared into the horizon, and there was nothing ahead but the open pasture. With the sun’s familiar warmth curling around him, he didn’t bother looking at a map as he set out for *Santa Mariana*.

A few days and too many packs of cigarettes later, Dream found himself hit with a tidal wave of familiarity, drowning in the sickeningly sweet nostalgia as his horse’s hooves hit the familiar dirt road dampened by the rain. He was cold, hungry, and wishing he hadn’t run out of laudanum, but he was here.

Dream could see the other edge of town from where he stood, it wouldn't be hard to find George, even if he hadn't already memorized exactly where his house was. Nonetheless, he found somewhere somewhat dry and safe for his horse, and trudged into the heart of the storm.

It dawned on Dream that this was brash, imprudent, and above all, stupid. Dream knew he should've at least waited to heal, but the convalescent period, *waiting* would've killed him. He convinced himself it was better to risk it all.

Maybe it was romantic. Maybe it was desperate. Maybe it was outright idiotic. Whatever it was, Dream didn't care. He was going to see George again, and then he was going to leave this hidden tenth circle of hell forever, with or without him.

Walking up the steps to George's house, Dream's hands shook furiously in his pockets. He convinced himself it was the withdrawals. He couldn't feel his fingers as he knocked on the door, trembling from something more than the cold, something Dream wasn't going to acknowledge.

At first, he worried George hadn't heard him over the rain, and he knocked again. After the third knock he realized George was intentionally ignoring the knocking, and knocked even louder for the fourth and final time.

From within, he heard shuffling across the floor, the creaking of the floorboards, and the clumsy loading of the gun.

"State your name and business," George called curtly through the door.

Hearing his muffled voice made Dream sick to his stomach. It was so easy to think about George when he was nothing more than a mere memory, it was so *easy* when he was just humoring delusions that could never reject him, never look at him with contempt in his eyes. George was real, and Dream couldn't handle this.

Shit, I need to respond. "Oh, um," - Dream broke out in a nervous laughter, and wanted to kick himself for being such an idiot and sounding so meek - "Dream, and I-,"

In a flash, George flung the door open, his mouth was pursed into a tight line, but his eyes were wide with fear, anger, and a twinge of something Dream couldn't place. He was panting rapidly, his chest falling and rising apparent through his clothes. The shotgun he held clattered to the ground as the two men stared at one another, each at a loss.

Dream thought he looked so, indescribably beautiful, but *fuck*, he looked so different, stoic and cold and all edges, from his jaw to the corners of his eyes. Maybe it was selfish of Dream to expect him to look the same. Either way, Dream was grateful for the pouring rain, because at least it masked the sound of his own heart beating.

Say something. "Hey, stranger," *Goddamn it.*

George slammed the door in his face. Dream didn't know whether he should laugh or leave or rip out his stitches. He was too shocked to be sad, but he knew he would be eventually. For now, he waited.

It can't get any worse, can it? "Is now not a good time?" Dream asked tentatively through the door.

They bickered a bit, George called Dream a cocky son of a bitch when he thought he couldn't hear him, but it was mostly a blur. Dream was fully on autopilot, too overwhelmed with his own apprehension to put any thought into what he was saying. He could barely even hear what George

said over the cacophony rattling his apparently empty skull. He clenched his jaw so hard he could've sworn bits of teeth were chipping off.

Please let this work out.

When George opened the door again, he looked significantly worse, as though he just left a funeral. His eyes were now rimmed with red, bringing out their bloodshotness. George told Dream to leave his guns at the door and let him inside, but it sounded like he was speaking through water. Lagging behind, Dream shucked his guns on the patio, and stepped inside, water from his coat dripping onto the wood floors. George motioned for Dream to sit across from him, reminiscent of Dream's last conversation with Techno, but with none of the generosity or hospitality.

"Do you want a drink?" He asked stiffly.

Dream shook his head, "Thank you, but I don't drink,"

"Since when?" *He sounds bitter.*

"Since I took a bullet to the side about a week ago," Dream answered bluntly, thrumming his fingers against the table. He didn't miss the way George clenched his jaw as he did so, but he made no effort to stop.

"That's recent," George commented. He made no indication of sympathy.

"Yeah, it still hurts like a bitch,"

George nodded slowly, but said no more. Dream hated the way he was looking at him, like he was some sort of rat or cockroach that's impinged on George's peace. Dream hated that George acted like it wasn't *him* who walked, like *he* had the right to be angry at Dream. Vaguely, Dream wondered if this was even a good idea, if he should even bother convincing George of his ridiculous plan.

For a brief second, George's expression shifted into something that was almost soft, even tender. His eyes were filled with warmth instead of coldness, relief instead of ire. There was a flicker of fondness, and Dream realized, in that moment, he'd do anything to recapture that flame.

Love makes you a fucking moron.

Presently, neither were speaking. Dream didn't know what to say, and especially not when George was looking at him so expectantly. Where there was once tenderness in George's eyes, there was now condescending distaste, even resentment. That didn't feel fair to Dream.

"I don't reckon you're going to tell me why you're here now?" George intoned.

Dream couldn't collect his thoughts, there were a million flashing images in front of his eyes, clouding his vision - the time he almost died, what George's final words to him were, the enormity of his feelings, the second time he almost died, that he had spent every single second since George left being stupidly, *stupidly* in love with him - how was dream supposed to summarize that in a way that made sense? In a way that made him sound endearing, and not a hung-up, obsessive sycophant. How was he supposed to win George back when he himself was such an unequivocal idiot?

He didn't have time to answer those questions, not when George was leering at him with those cold eyes and an expecting expression. It was like sitting across from an unloving god, awaiting judgement.

Maybe, by some miraculous chance of the universe, Dream would make this work.

Why am I here?

In panic, he blurted the first words he could think of.

“I want you to bury me,”

falling back into place

Chapter Summary

George locked his jaw hard enough to shatter his skull. “It doesn’t matter if I miss it or want it or not. Because we can never go back to the way things used to be,”

“Why not?” Dream sounded borderline hysterical, his tone having turned pitchy and his voice cracking at the ends of his words.

“Because everything’s different,”

“It doesn’t have to be,”

“Yes, it does,”

“Why?”

George pointed at himself, and with the conviction of god judging the damned, snarled, “Because I ruined everything,”

Chapter Notes

This is the rest of part 3! This is probably the most nervous I’ve ever been when posting a fanfic, which I’m pretty sure I said for the last installment as well - but it’s still true this time!

Hope you love it, sorry if you hate it.

The title is inspired by Space Song by Beach House.

enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I want you to bury me,”

How the fuck am I supposed to answer that?

That was the last thing George expected to come out of Dream’s mouth, not here, and not now, anyway.

About a year prior, George stumbled onto Sapnap’s doorstep in shambles, having recently returned

from his six month escapade with a mysterious, faceless gunslinger. His explanation sounded like it was ripped right out of a campfire story, but it was all painfully real, down to the part where he left.

Sapnap was understanding, and let George take time to emotionally recover - if “recovery” was staring out the window all day, or sitting with his head in his hands for hours at a time. Thus, George spent the first month of his return moping, leaving his house only on rare occasions, while his fellow sheriff sorted out the legality of George’s pseudo-death.

Luckily, the residents of *Santa Mariana* were too poor to have bought George’s house during his sojourning, so that was still in his position. At least he didn’t have to sleep on the streets during his pity party, *oh joy* .

Although, being home - if he could call it that - wasn’t optimal either. It was eerie how untouched everything in his house was, as though it was a piece of the past, frozen in a perpetual state of stasis. George felt like an alien, an anachronism to his own life. Nothing about the blank wooden walls and creaky floors felt like home anymore. Maybe they never did. Maybe George had only been convincing himself they ever were.

George reprised his role as the town hero, just without the praise nor appreciation of the people. The townspeople proved to be unrelentingly superstitious. Naturally, his return sparked chatter around the various social circles of the citizens, but he wasn’t expecting to hear rumors desecrating his formerly good name.

Many individuals believed George was a ghost, a phantom, or some sort of undead monster. After all, they watched his casket get buried, they all saw his tombstone on the edge of town - how could he miraculously return after six months? He was thought to be some sort of bad omen, akin to a kite or a black butterfly. He was a blight on their pretty, little town.

To George, it was baffling how he went from being their revered sheriff to being, quite literally, dead to them. Mothers would pull their children closer when he walked by, his pew was always empty when he attended church, and the town was always a little quieter when he was on watch. It was as though an albatross adorned his neck.

Still, life had to go on.

And it did.

George invested in a good pair of gloves. He started reading more and more in his laytime, filling his head with the thoughts of others to avoid his own. He visited his own grave on more than one occasion to the point where it became a part of his weekly routine. Sapnap was in company frequently - they talked daily, they drank together, they had good times. Life had to go on, and it did.

George was surprised how easy it was to get over Dream after that first month. At first, he thought he'd always hold a repository of fondness for Dream, that his memory would be like a cold he couldn't shake. Then, George hardened, and grew numb to his own affections. His feelings couldn't hold him hostage if he locked them away and threw out the key.

He became a foreigner in his own skin, an intruder to his own thoughts. And that was all *fine*, it didn't matter if sometimes he slept on the floor because he hated the feeling of being alone in his own bed, or sometimes he wouldn't sleep at all because he was damned to think of what could've been, or he was overwhelmed with ink-like guilt that would come and wouldn't leave, staining him. It was *fine* if he didn't think about it too hard, if he didn't let himself cry, and if he let himself forget. George was happy to let himself forget.

"George, can I ask you something?" Sapnap asked out of seemingly nowhere. The two had been having dinner together after a relatively uneventful day in their boring, dinky town. Home sweet home, right?

"Shoot,"

Sapnap paused. "Have you thought about finding a partner?"

George nearly dropped his fork, "I have a partner. You're my partner,"

Sapnap rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean,"

"Pardon?"

"I mean, you're twenty-four now. I was wonderin' if you wanted to pursue other... options," Sapnap shrugged before adding on more quietly, like a child saying a swear word behind a schoolhouse, "other men,"

George bit his tongue, choking back the slew of insults that he held prisoner behind his teeth. The

very implication of the proposal made him lightheaded - he refused to return to romance. He wouldn't allow himself to do something so foolish again.

Sapnap, at his friend's lack of response, jumped to add, "I'm just sayin', if you wanted to, you could-"

"I think you'll find there's very few men who share my," George paused, coercing out the last word, "Preferences,"

"I mean, you could probably find someone-"

"No," George interrupted brusquely, not meeting the other's eyes, "Thank you, Sapnap, but no,"

I'm a sick man.

The rest of the evening was tense.

Still, life went on, but George thought about that short conversation for a long seven days. Sapnap's words were like twitchy fingers picking at a long-forgotten scab, reminding George of what he was told all those months ago; *There's a difference between being reserved and being in denial*. Was he moving on, or was he just rapt at suppressing every thought he didn't have the spine to confront?

Not that that mattered now, George would tell himself, repeatedly. *It was over. It is over.*

That much was true. It was over.

George was happy to let himself forget.

That was, until Dream turned up on George's door step in the middle of the night, unmasked and soaked from head to toe in rain.

It was a sullen night, one that was simultaneously uproariously loud and deafeningly mute, the

downpour of rain a spate of static in George's ears. He sequestered himself away, waiting out the storm as his house creaked and wailed under the deluge. It was rare to get rain in this part of the country. He told himself it'd be good for the crops, even if the sound of drops pounding on his windows and the ticking of his grandfather clock made him feel like a mad dog.

Late in the eve, there had been a knock at the door, barely audible over the roar of the storm. George would've been annoyed at the disturbance if he hadn't already been awake, shaken far beyond the point of sleep.

Then, came a second and third knock, each increasingly loud. At the fourth, George was out of bed, haphazardly throwing on clothes to look semi presentable, and by the fifth, he had his hand on the doorknob with a loaded shotgun in the other.

"State your name and business," He spoke loudly, hoping his voice carried through the door.

"Oh, um," - a familiar voice laughed softly - "Dream, and I-,"

Dream.

He didn't have the chance to finish because, against his better judgement, George had already swung the door open so violently that it dented the wall, the hinges whining at the violence. Dream staggered back in either shock or fear, his shoulders tensing and eyes widening as he laid eyes on the other man.

George scoured him rapidly, his eyes jumping from his grimy nails to his bloodshot eyes and grown-out hair. His green, nearly grey duster was terribly worn out - and were those bloodstains? He looked kind of shitty like that - too small for his own ego. It made George's heart ache, once again, against his better judgement.

George could suppress memories, but he couldn't suppress the way Dream made him react, made him feel. His heart beat against his ribcage, threatening to shatter the bones with its force. Dream's presence was an act of violence.

Dream beamed, and with ebullience palpable in his tone, said "Hey, stranger,"

George slammed the door in his face, fell against it, and slid to the ground with his head in his

hands. He drew in ragged breaths, pressing his back into the wall, scrambling like an animal caught in a trap. It was supposed to be *over*. November first was the grand finale, there wasn't supposed to be an encore, an epilogue. Dream was defying the fate that George had authored and signed. *Stupid, stubborn bastard.*

George didn't realize how violently he was heaving, desperate to gulp any air into his lungs, and he didn't have the mental capacity to take notice. He was drowning or asphyxiating or *something*, and it was because of Dream.

Dream spoke through the door, muffled, "Is now not a good time?"

Of course not, asshole. "Um, I need a moment,"

George felt utterly pathetic like this, standing with trembling legs and leaning against the door for support. *He* was the one who left, the one who destroyed everything beyond the point of return. He couldn't afford to act like a skittish pansy of a man, not in front of Dream.

"Right,"

"I wasn't expecting you,"

"I figured, yeah,"

Under his breath, George muttered, "Cocky son of a bitch,"

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," George ran his leathery fingers over the rough, wood door. He resented the fact that he could still recall the way Dream's hand felt in his, the phantom of his warmth lingering in his memory. George's voice cracked, and he hated how piteous he sounded as he said, "I thought you hated me,"

His heart swelled when he heard Dream laughing through the door, the sound as wheezy and light as he remembered.

"What's so funny?"

“You’re as dumb as I remember,” - George could hear the smile in Dream’s voice - “if you think I could ever hate you,”

George’s heart stuttered at the fondness in Dream’s voice, his hands curling into knuckles against the wood, nails digging into the grains. “You should,” *It’s true. I shouldn’t regret saying that if it’s true.*

There came no response.

He exhaled shakily, forehead pressed against the door. “Why the hell are you here?”

“I want to talk,”

I don’t.

I can’t.

“Can you, um - can you leave?” George asked meekly, not sure what else to say. *There will be no encore.*

Dream was silent for a long moment, and George thought he might’ve left. The idea filled him with both liberating relief and suffocating dread.

Finally, Dream said, “Please, let me ask you something?”

Before, it was one drink, now it was one question. It was always one of anything that led to George getting hurt.

Every memory of Dream George had stored in his mind, down to the second, was flashing in his mind, all the times they reached for the same bottle of alcohol and their hands lingered too long, every time Dream pulled George closer in a sleep-addled haze. George’s sternum ached at the thought.

He wanted to tell Dream to leave. He wanted to tell Dream he didn't regret what he said last November, and he'd repeat it all again, verbatim. But *god*, the insomnia weighed heavy on him, and he couldn't recall a time he'd ever felt so tired. The moon was bright and the night was young for making decisions he'd come to regret. He was already reaching for his gloves and discarding his gun.

George opened the door.

"Leave your guns outside, don't try to pull any ace in the hole bullshit either," George ordered, before seating himself at the living room table.

Dream sloshed across the room, following suit after leaving his guns on the patio. He stared at George intently, as though he couldn't physically take his eyes off him, and George looked anywhere except at Dream. The dripping of the water from Dream's clothes on the floor combined with the inane clicking off the grandfather clock was enough to make George feel violent.

George offered him a drink, Dream rejected. George asked why, Dream said he was shot. George didn't know what to say to that. It was unfortunate. He didn't say as much.

Dream started thrumming his fingers on the table, and George resisted the overwhelming urge to rip his own teeth out.

He grit out, "I don't reckon you're going to tell me why you're here now?"

Dream looked George dead in the eyes, stone-faced and tight lipped for a long moment. George wondered if he was thinking about him, and if he was, were his thoughts towards him favorable. Realistically, they weren't, but George held on to a stupid sliver of hope regardless.

George sighed, and told himself Dream probably wanted money, or to tell him off or something else stupid. Maybe he was going to kill him. That wasn't a terrible thought either.

When Dream finally spoke, he spoke in monotone, his voice insuperable.

"I want you to bury me,"

And that's what it had all been leading up to, that was the big thing Dream came all this way to tell him.

Really, how was George supposed to answer that?

Dream had already contravened their unspoken agreement to never see each other again by merely showing up, but this was something else entirely.

George blinked once, twice, and finally thrice, mouth agape. "Pardon?"

Dream's face contorted at that, as he sputtered in elaboration, "Like, when I die, I mean. Not now. I, uh, I need you to make a promise for me,"

George shook his head with contempt, "I won't promise you anything,"

"I've been doing a lot of thinkin' lately," Dream continued, "Listen, lately, I spoke to Techno,"

"*Techno*?"

"Well," Dream looked a little unsure of himself, "Turns out he isn't that bad of a guy. We sorta worked things out,"

"Lovely,"

"Well, do you remember the commune we visited that one time? With all the Europeans?" - Dream didn't wait for a response - "Well, that all went to shit, but Techno apparently has a half-brother that used to live there, well, he really had it out for me - little son of a bitch hated me. Point is, that's the bastard who shot me,"

Dream paused, thrumming his fingers on the table once again and looking off distantly, as though he was partially elsewhere. George crossed his legs, then uncrossed them, and put his hands uselessly in his lap. He was not sure what to make of the information Dream disclosed.

Dream continued, “While I was laying there, bleeding out in the middle of the road, all these people were watching. I already knew I was dying, but then I had this second realization that nobody was going to help me. I was alone, you know? The fact of the situation wasn’t just that I was dying - it was that I was dying, and nobody cared,”

Dream laughed dryly. George thought he sounded insane, and he decided to say as much as an act of clemency.

When George didn’t respond, Dream added, “I would’ve died if Techno hadn’t saved me. What a crazy bastard. Anyway, everyone thinks I’m dead anyway,”

“Of course,” George intoned.

“And if I *had* died there, they would’ve left me for the vultures or fed me to the coyotes. I’d be gone, and everyone would be none the wiser. Unless they caught wind of the rumors, of course,”

“You came out here,” George spoke carefully, “To make me promise to bury you when you die?”

“I came out here in hopes I could see you again,” Dream said honestly, borderline pleading, “There’s a reason I went to you, specifically,”

“Even after what happened,” George talked under his breath, knowing Dream heard him. They both pretended he didn’t.

Averting his gaze, Dream replied, “I don’t know if you recall what I said all those months ago in the summer of ‘80, but I meant it. I didn’t want to lose you,”

George’s chest swelled with warmth when he heard that, followed by the cold of ugly acrimony. George suddenly felt hyper-aware of the space he was taking up in the room and the air he was breathing. He absently fiddled with his sheriff’s badge and prayed to be struck down, anything to save him from this.

“Then why’d you let me leave?”

“It wasn’t my place to tell you not to,”

“Yes, it was,” George refuted, staring at Dream with daggers in his eyes, “You were the only

person on this bitch of an earth who had the right to tell me that. And you didn't,"

"I didn't," Dream echoed almost apologetically. He sounded like he was grieving. "But I don't think you should be taking the high road here, considering you're the one who actually left,"

And there it is. George's remorse was quickly replaced by white, hot ire. Incensed, he hissed, "You came all this way to guilt me?"

"I actually have a proposition for you-"

"A promise *and* a proposition?" George retorted, raising a quizzical eyebrow, "You're asking quite a bit of me, aren't you?" - *This isn't fair* - "Whatever game you're playing here, leave me out of it. I'm done,"

"I want you to run away with me,"

George felt as though he had been submerged in water, his whole body was frozen and he was drowning again.

"Pardon?" He managed.

Dream rushed to respond, "Techno told me I said your name while I was dying. And only your name,"

He thought of me when he died.

Huh.

George wasn't sure if he was supposed to be perturbed or flattered, if he should drop to Dream's feet or kick him out. It was becoming apparent that Dream might not hate him, that he might still harbor some fondness for George, and George didn't know what to make of that. Dream shouldn't love him. He resolved to kick him out.

George stood abruptly, his chair grinding against the floor as he planted his hands firmly on the table. It rattled under the slam of George's gloved hands. He opened his mouth, ready to curse Dream out or banish him or say a number of questionable threats, but the door swung open before he got the chance.

Dream and George snapped their heads to find a rather shocked Sapnap had let himself in. Dream's hand instinctively snapped to his bandana, but didn't move it over his face

"Howdy, George, I-" Looking like a deer in headlights, Sapnap cut himself off, before saying, "Uh, sorry. I didn't realize you had company,"

George and Dream glanced at each other, then back to Sapnap unspeakingly.

"Am I interrupting something?" He asked, cumbersome.

Slowly, George stepped away from the table, and with the steadiest tone he could manage, said "Sapnap, can I speak with you in private?"

Sapnap's confusion was clear as day on his face, but George was dragging him out the door before he had a chance to respond. George threw one last pointed look in Dream's direction. Their exit was punctuated by the slam of the door.

"The hell? It's cold as a-"

"Quit your bitching," George snapped.

Sapnap grumbled, "A little temperamental tonight, are you?"

"Do you know who the hell is in there?"

"No clue,"

George covered his mouth, exhaling deeply. He was starting to feel lightheaded again, his throat

constricting. “That’s Dream,”

“Dream?” A flash of confusion followed by contingent recognition crossed Sapnap’s eyes, “The hell is he doing here?”

“Shit if I know,” George wheezed, growing increasingly flustered.

“But?”

“But then,” George hissed, “He showed up out of bloody nowhere. Made me promise to bury him and started talking about all this cryptic, pretentious bullshit about how nobody cares about him, and then he told me he missed me and didn’t want to lose me and I - I don’t know what he wants from me. I thought it was over,”

“Do you want him to leave?” Sapnap gestured to his revolver, “ ‘Cause I can get him to leave,”

“That won’t be necessary,” George said firmly, then with softness, “I don’t think I’m ready for him to leave,”

“I thought you didn’t want him here?”

“I don’t! But I do, shit, I don’t know, everything feels off kilter when Dream’s around,”

Sapnap exhaled heavily, and gently said, “George, It’s okay if you still miss Dream-”

“I don’t,” George snapped, his mouth moving faster than he could process what he was saying, “I don’t miss him because I don’t need him. I don’t need anybody,”

Sapnap’s initially taken aback expression contorted into something of pity, which only made George more incendiary, but he bit his tongue.

With an uncanny gentleness, Sapnap urged, “I think you should talk to him,”

“There’s nothing to talk about,”

“You’re being a dumbass,” Sapnap said, “If you don’t want to talk to him right now, you two need to work your shit out eventually. Or he should leave,”

They decided on an arrangement, and thus, a short few minutes later, George and Sapnap stood in front of Dream, the former fidgeting with his hands and the latter glaring pointedly.

“You can stay, Dream, just,” George sighed, he was so goddamn tired, “not here,”

“You’ll be taking residence with me for the foreseeable future,” Sapnap added bluntly.

Dream raised an eyebrow, “That so?”

“Sure is,”

George bid Sapnap and Dream a tired farewell, as the latter two left to get acquainted with each other. George felt about ready to crash and burn.

Sapnap silently gestured for Dream to sit across from him at yet another kitchen table. Sapnap placed his revolver on the table, the dull thud sounding loudly in the otherwise silent room.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,”

“All bad, I hope,” Dream joked.

Sapnap snorted at that, “Hardly. George spoke... very fondly of you,”

“Is that so?” Sapnap could’ve sworn he saw Dream smile at that.

“It is,” Sapnap looked at the other man, his gaze unflinching and flinty, “Y’know, George is

something of a brother to me. I care about him,”

“As do I,”

“Right. Can I tell you something?” Sapnap said, brushing over what Dream said. He didn’t wait for a response, leaning over the table, his eyes flared and tone venomous as he sibilated, “I’ve known George for nearly five years now, which is far longer than you. I don’t like you for what you did, playin’ with George’s emotions like that, but I’m playing nice because for some reason unbeknownst to me, he’s decided to keep you around. For now,”

Dream didn’t respond, he merely locked his jaw and listened.

Sapnap continued, “If you’re here to fuck with him, then by god, you best get out of my town faster than you can count to ten, and pray that you never cross paths with me again,”

“You don’t know what happened between us,” Dream stated with a flat tone.

“No, I don’t know exactly what happened between you two during your lover’s quarrel,” Sapnap agreed, eyes narrowed, “But I know how he felt after you two went your different paths, and I won’t let him sink that low like that again because of *you* ,”

The words hung between them, and for a moment it felt as though the world was perfectly still. Dream was crushed under the weight of Sapnap’s glare. Finally, Dream nodded, slowly and wordlessly.

That was the end of their conversation, and there wasn’t any more speaking for the rest of the night. Dream slept in Sapnap’s guest room, alone, while George did the same in his own bed one house over.

George awoke to the hazy sunrise, the light obscured by gloomy tendrils of fog washing through the streets like waves. He took his time dressing himself, with no reason to rush, not to where he was headed, at least.

He’d nearly forgotten about last night’s encounter, but the askew chairs in his dining room served as a reminder to the chaos that unfolded.

It was a whole debacle. And this was George's reality now.

Feeling like a bag of bricks, George grabbed a cluster of white yarrow flowers on the way out the door from a drying out in a dusty, chipped vase. Despite the fact it was the crack of dawn, he barely made it five steps into the street before being accosted.

"George!"

He snapped his head in the direction of the sound, evidently, it was Dream who said it. He was lazing on Sapnap's patio, a cigarette dangling lazily between his two fingers as he waved. He was wearing a button up, though the top half of the buttons were undone, and his signature green duster was missing. The sleeves to his button up were rolled up, and his jeans were cuffed up to his calves, and a garishly patterned handmade shawl draped over his shoulders like a stole - it was all terribly ungenteel, George thought. What absolutely atrocious deportment.

He turned on his heel, pretending he didn't hear Dream and continuing en route.

"Where are you going?"

George froze in place. Navigating conversation with Dream was like being the blind captain of a one-man crew at sea. Especially when he was acting all too *normal* about the ordeal.

Without turning to face the other man, he called out in response, "I'm going on a walk,"

Dream stood from Sapnap's chair, already making his way down the porch steps as he asked, "Can I join you?"

"If you insist," George relented.

He paused, waiting for Dream to catch up. Then, they trudged through the streets noiselessly. George couldn't tell if he was clammy because of the post-storm mist, or because Dream was standing a few inches away from him. He was *here*, and being oddly friendly when he really should've decked George and ran last night. It still didn't feel entirely real.

As if trying to prove how very real and tangible he was, Dream asked “How are you?”

Terrible. Wonderful. I don't want you here, but I can't let you leave. “I'm fine,”

“Are you cold?”

“I'm fine,”

“Who are the flowers for?”

George gripped the yarrows tighter through his gloves, ignoring the fact the stems were probably snapping under the pressure. He ground his teeth, “Ask a different question,”

“It's Sunday,”

“That's not a question,”

“Don't you go to church?”

“Not anymore,”

“Why is that?” When George set his jaw, Dream changed the subject without prompting, “Where are we going?”

“You'll see,”

“Always so secretive,” Dream teased, but there was no malice in his words.

George laughed dryly, “I 'spose you'd know about that better than anybody,”

The sentence had slipped out unintentionally, really.

George didn't want to say that, but here he was, now making eye contact with Dream, ignoring the prickles of humiliation creeping down his spine. They shared a look of mutual acknowledgement, the implications of which George wasn't prepared to deal with at dawn. George was already drunk

on nostalgia, poisoned by the incursion of memories he wished he could forget so he could hate Dream instead of himself.

So much was different. Too much was the same

He charged a few steps forward, Dream trailing behind. They walked in silence to the outskirts of the town, a vast flatland adorned by a single hill peppered with patches of tallgrass and wildflowers, and a lone apple tree stood proudly on the crest of it. Dozens of crumbling tombstones jutted out from the ground like cancers among the greenery. The sunlight caught the morning fog, casting the whole scene in a hazy glow.

George merely walked up the slope, his feet growing heavier with every step until he reached the top and made his way to the tree. Dream followed at his heel. At the crest, the two were greeted by George's legal name, engraved in dull, grey stone.

It never got easier, staring at his own grave.

"I died," George remarked inanely.

Dream took a long drag from his cigarette, coughing on the exhale, "What the fuck?"

George couldn't help but laugh at that, allaying some of the tension in the air, "Yeah, *what the fuck* is right,"

"Should I be asking how or why...?" Dream trailed off, his gaze bouncing rapidly between George and his tombstone.

"When I was with you," George said the words delicately, as though he was handing a precious gem, "They declared me dead. Six months is a long time to be gone, and since there was no trace of me... yeah. And now all these folks"- He gestured to the town - "hate me now, though. They think me to be some sort of devil or phantom or monster,"

"Ah,"

"It's kind of funny, if you think about it," A pause. "Maybe I only tell myself that so I don't feel sad,"

George intended for the last part to be a joke, but the words came out clunky and decidedly uncomedic. Dream didn't respond. George didn't expect him to, anyway.

He stiffly shuffled up to his grave, and placed the yarrows with the now-crushed stems atop last week's yarrows, and the yarrows before that, and before that, and so on. Part of him felt like he should say a prayer, maybe a *hail mary* or an *our father*, but he couldn't bring himself to, not while Dream was watching him with the eyes of a vulture. George took his place next to Dream again, stumbling back into place. Their hands brushed, and George felt the other's hand twitch through the leather of his own gloves.

How long had it been since he touched Dream? How long will it be until he touches him again? *I want him to touch me. No, that's sick. I'm sick.* George seriously thought he might be dying.

Dream eyed the bed of wilted, crumbled yarrows sitting atop the grass just under the fresh ones, "Do you... do this often?"

"Every week," George covered his face with a gloved hand, "You think it's weird,"

"No, no, no," Dream assured him, "I mean, it's not like I have the right to judge," - Dream rubbed the back of his own neck - "Um, if it makes you feel any better, there's a tombstone for me back home,"

George had already heard so many impossible, absurd things about Dream, hell, he'd witnessed them firsthand. Dream faking his own death was hardly scandalous or surprising at this point.

More exasperated than anything, George asked, "Why might that be?"

Dream shrugged noncommittally, "Because I faked my own death before I moved west,"

George felt like he got punched in the jaw with the shock that overcame him. He whipped around to face Dream, "You're not from the west?"

"I'm from Florida," He explained clunkily, rubbing the back of his neck, "And I wanted to leave. So I faked my death when I was fifteen,"

“Naturally,” George replied, incredulous.

Dream kept rambling, either not noticing that George looked absolutely befuddled or making a concerted effort to not mention it, “They put up a pretty tombstone for me back home, though, it must’ve been awfully exorbitant. It says ‘Clay Langley’ across it in fancy letters-”

“Clay Langley?” George interrupted, staggering backward a few steps. He felt faint.

Dream blinked, “In the bones and blood, yeah,”

“Your full name is Clay Langley?”

“That’s what it says on my birth certificate,” He fiddled with the cuffs of his sleeve and avoided eye contact, “I never told you?”

“No, you didn’t,” George shook his head, unable to tell if he wanted to laugh or cry, “I - we were... we were in company for six months, and I didn’t think to ask what your real name was. You didn’t think to tell me,” - George laughed mirthlessly, *I don’t know you as well as I thought* - “You’re the most infamous gunslinger the badlands has ever known, and you aren’t even from the west,”

“Well, you aren’t either,”

“That’s not the point,”

“What *is* the point, then?” Dream muttered with a voice as bitter as laudanum. He took a long drag from his cigarette, staring at George’s headstone instead of him.

“The point is I don’t know you,”

“Please,” Dream scorned, “You knew me better than anyone,”

“Then why didn’t I know your real name?”

“ ‘Cause I haven’t told anyone it in six years,”

“Why did you let me leave you if I knew you so well?”

George slapped a hand over his mouth. What is it about Dream that made him feel the urge to gut himself? Neither of them knew what to say. Every second with Dream was like picking at a long scabbed-over wound, revealing the inflamed skin underneath.

Finally, “George, can I ask you something?”

“Something tells me you’ll ask regardless of whether or not I agree,”

“I won’t ask if you don’t agree,”

George considered for a moment. “Ask,”

“Do you feel ashamed to look at me?”

Slowly, George responded, “I’m not ashamed to look at you. I’m ashamed to be around you,”

“Were you ashamed when we were together? Did I make you happy, even once?”

Glacial trepidation flooded into George’s blood stream, paralyzing him. He wasn’t prepared to hear that, not in the slightest. The question hit him like a sack of bricks to the cranium. He had a concussion from the impact.

George snapped, “Don’t say it like that,”

“I think I deserve to know,” Dream continued, uncompromising. He was practically begging.

“I don’t want to talk about this,” George turned on his heel, choosing the latter in *fight or flight* , but Dream’s words cut through to him like jagged blades.

“I was happy with you, George,” Dream blurted, “Tell me you didn’t feel the same. Say you regret all of it, except the part where you left,”

George swallowed thickly, Dream’s words replaying in his mind like a broken record, *I want you to run away with me* . He felt like he had been maimed.

He clenched his hands impossibly hard. “It doesn’t matter if I regret it or not, because it’s over now,”

“Is it?” Dream’s voice cracked with something other than anger, and it made George want to cry, “I mean, I’m here, aren’t I?”

“I don’t want to answer that,”

“I need to know if you want me here,”

“You don’t need anything from me,” George insisted. He was closing up against, shutting himself out of his mind and burying the key.

With a crestfallen sigh, Dream pulled his shawl from off his shoulders, and spread it over George’s, the brightly-colored fabric swallowing his lithe frame.

“Have a good day, George,” was all Dream said before he left, the pitter patter of his footsteps growing more distant each time.

George stood there, for a moment, drinking in the residual warmth from Dream’s hideous shawl. If he closed his eyes, he could pretend he was back at those cheap inns all too long ago, when Dream would cradle him close to his chest until sunrise.

God, I’m pitiful.

They didn’t speak for a few days after that. Dream was around, though, lingering around like a cough after a cold or a churchgoers after a service. He didn’t speak to George, either out of fear of getting his head bitten off or out of begrudging respect of his indignation.

George went about his life as normal, or at least as normally as he could, anyway, in a town full of people who didn't trust him while his estranged lover lived with best friend one house over. Strange world he lived in.

George would never admit it, but a deep, ugly part of himself resented Dream. He hated seeing Dream slowly become a wastrel, always gazing at him with lonesome, pansy eyes, and begging for a confession or admission of guilt. George wanted to wipe the patheticism from his harrowed expression, tell Dream to tell him what he really wants like a man or to get the hell out .

He'd never actually say it, though.

Dream was lounging on Sapnap's porch, smoking like he had an endless supply of tobacco. George had a message to relay to Sapnap, and he opted to bite the bullet and willingly step within a five-foot radius of Dream.

George made his way up to Sapnap's door, and rapped his knuckles against it, letter in hand. It was strange, being a yard away from Dream, yet pretending he doesn't exist.

"Good afternoon," Dream said tentatively, as though he was walking on glass.

"Afternoon," George mumbled, tipping his hat in Dream's direction. He rapped his knuckles on the door, and after a long moment

After a few minutes of some of the most painfully awkward silence imaginable, Dream piped up again, "Sap's not home,"

Since when were they on a nickname basis? George huffed. "Well, now I just look like an idiot for standing here,"

Dream grinned crookedly, "But you always look like an idiot,"

George tensed, prepared to bite back had it not been for Dream's laugh, the sound hearty and kind, bringing undeniable warmth to George's face. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed hearing Dream's wheezing laugh, and he hadn't realized how contagious it was - he was smiling against his better judgement.

“Well, good afternoon, then,” George said, already turning on his heel to leave.

“Wait!” Dream reached out for George’s shoulder, retracting his hand back when the other man flinched at his touch. George wished Dream would put his hand back. *What’s wrong with me?*

“Yes, Dream?” George asked curtly, burying his inner emaciation for affection like a coffin.

He wished they could interact like friends or lovers or enemies, but no, that’d be too simple. They were some mix of all three, and every interaction between them was so heavy. There was so much baggage between the two of them.

Dream stood up, taller than George remembered. He fumbled with his words for a few seconds.

“Spit it out, Dream,”

Dream blurted, “How are you with a revolver?”

“Shit as ever,” George intoned, “Why do you ask?”

“I could help you,” Dream offered, the words coming out quiet and unassertive. It almost sounded like a question rather than a statement, “If you want,”

“Right now?”

“Sure. Why not?” Dream tapped his holster, “I’ve got a gun we can practice with,”

George narrowed his eyes, “Is there any particular reason you’re asking?”

“You’re a chronic overthinker. Did you know that?” Dream put out his cigarette under his boot, and stretched his arms overhead. George actively chose to ignore the way his untucked shirt rode up, flashing his stomach, “It’s a simple offer,”

George didn't want to take it. Another interaction with Dream was another opportunity to hurt him, and he was already confused and hysterical and angry at himself and Dream at the same time, always, and it was living hell.

His mouth dry, George grumbled, "I suppose I haven't anything better to do,"

George mentally berated himself for caving in easily, *too* easily - especially when Dream made doing everything else so difficult, like sleeping or thinking or breathing.

They made their way to the graveyard, for it was one of the few places in the town that had trees - branches could be used for targets - and it was far enough on the outskirts that the sound of gunfire wouldn't disturb the town.

Dream held out his own revolver to George, hand on the barrel, "You can use mine,"

George slipped his hand into the grip easily, nearly dropping at first. He didn't realize how long it had been since he last held a firearm with the intent to shoot. The weight was unfamiliar in his hand.

George was snapped out of his pondering when Dream looked at him quizzically, asking, "You shoot with your left?"

George looked down at his hands, as if expecting to prove Dream's observation wrong. "I guess I do,"

"Some say that means you're the spawn of the devil," He teased.

George bristled, "So I've been told," and tightened his grip.

"Right," Dream, brushed him off and continued, "I assume you know how to hold the gun one-handed, but for a steadier shot and higher accuracy, you should probably hold it two handed," - He moved to stand next to other man, gently grasping his gloved right hand - "Keep your hand relaxed, with your forefinger on the trigger guard and your thumb on the hammer..."

Dream guided the other's hand as he spoke, standing closer than could be possibly justified. George could push him away if he wanted. He could step away if he wanted. But he didn't.

"When you hold your arms out, make sure to keep your forearm straight all the way down to your thumb," Dream explained, tracing from George's shoulder to his hand, his fingers barely grazing the fabric of George's clothes.

Suppressing a shudder, George locked his jaw and held out his arms, doing his best to mimic the form the other man explained to him. Dream looked him up and down, evaluating him for approval, and part of George wanted to die under the scrutiny. Another, much louder voice couldn't help but like the feel of Dream's gaze on him and him alone. He felt sick with himself.

Dream pointed to an apple on a low-hanging branch, bright red against the azure sky, and commanded, "Shoot,"

George obliged, flinching at the resounding bang. There was hardly an eventful day in *Santa Mariana*, and he couldn't remember the last time he fired a gun. The experience was somewhere between exhilarating and terrifying, either way, it was wholly too familiar.

When the smoke cleared, disappointment filled him when he saw the apple sitting proudly, unscathed. He fired twice, thrice, and on the fourth time he turned to Dream, frustration boiling under his skin.

"Well?"

"What do you want me to say?" Dream shrugged, something devilish glinting in his eye, "You have shit aim,"

George made a show of rolling his eyes melodramatically at that. "You're such a good teacher, Dream. Really, I'm *so* impressed. You know, not all of us are natural-born marksmen,"

"Well, they don't call me Deadeye Dream for nothing--"

"Absolutely nobody calls you that, you're full of shit, and you know it," George countered, unable to hide his smile. There was a warmth in his chest, a nostalgic sort of joy burned deep in George's heart when he heard Dream laugh with him. He had forced himself to forget how much he missed

this.

“Maybe so,” Dream took his place at the other’s side again, “But I’ve still got a few tricks up my sleeve,”

George’s laughter got caught in his throat, suffocating him as Dream stepped impossibly close to the other man, looming over him as his chest brushed against George’s back. He placed his right hand over the other’s, covering it entirely. There was no justification for why Dream was standing so close, George noted to himself, stuck somewhere between reverie and the overwhelming desire to tear his own skin off. He was paralyzed in fear, too terrified to confront the part of himself that liked *this*, that wanted *this* ... that wanted *Dream*.

I’m sick.

“Notice how your thumb on top kind of aligns with the barrel of the gun?”

George managed to hum in acknowledgment, suddenly very appreciative of the fact Dream was standing behind him instead of in front of him - that way, he couldn’t see how red George’s face was. He could feel every ounce of blood in his veins, all of it boiling.

Dream continued, his voice low and close, “Try aiming more with your thumb. Basically, think of that as a pointer as to where the bullet will go,”

George did his best to combat his own thoughts, his fondness that clawed at the walls of his chest, begging to be released, tearing him up from the inside and shredding any semblance of satisfaction he’d allowed himself to have.

I’m sick.

“Right,” George croaked out after a long moment, his mouth dry and face feverish.

He aimed and shot several times in a row, pulling the trigger with a eager finger. He missed every time. Disconsolate, he turned his head to face Dream.

“Sorry, I don’t think I can... ”

He trailed off, the words lodged in his throat due to both the overwhelming smell of gunpowder and the fact that Dream’s face was mere inches from his. His larger frame engulfed George’s, his warmth radiating against George through layers of fabric. It was overwhelming, the fact that George could see every detail of Dream’s face, every imperfection from the deep scar along his cheek to his defined cupid’s bow. He had almost forgotten what Dream looked like up close.

I’m sick. I’m sick. I’m sick.

Dream’s Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat as he swallowed. He remarked, “Your hand is shaking,”

And then, Dream planted a tentative hand on George’s hip. It very well could have been unwittingly, and if it wasn’t, it was most likely well-intentioned, but none of that mattered now, not when George was seriously contemplating cutting his tongue for enjoying the feeling of Dream’s touch. He couldn’t shake the feeling he had done something wrong, that he was betraying himself. Whether he realized it or now, Dream’s gesture was an act of warfare, sending George spiraling into his fight or flight instincts, his mind a tempestuous and belligerent battlefield. There would be no survivors.

George stepped away from Dream, seething, “You’re supposed to be a smart man, aren’t you? Take a guess as to why,”

It must’ve been something in George’s expression, eyebrows furrowed and teeth bared like a feral dog, because Dream’s expression shifted in a matter of seconds. He was utterly stricken with fear and something unmistakably apologetic.

As some sort of admission, Dream exasperatedly said, “I really didn’t want to fuck this up,”

I’ll do enough of that for the both of us , George thought scathingly. He hissed, “You shouldn’t be here,”

Dream looked so pathetic like this, so small now, nothing like the hardened criminal he once was, “I’ll give you time. I’ll wait until hell freezes over, just please,” - he exhaled shakily at that - “don’t leave again. Please,”

Something deep inside George's chest twisted upon hearing those words.

Dream continued, sounding more desperate by the moment, "I couldn't forget you. No matter how hard I tried, it always came back to you, ever since we first met, I reckon nearly two years ago. I ... I can't let go of you,"

"And do you think I completely forgot about you?" George spat, his voice a deadly sort of low, "Do you think any of this has been easy for me?"

"I've been hurting,"

"And that means I'm not?"

"You've been acting like you hate me,"

"I don't hate you, I hate what you do to me,"

"I still love you,"

Huh.

You're killing me, Dream.

George subconsciously touched a hand to his face, caught somewhere between wanting to kiss the other man and hit him. Shrilly, George hissed, "Why would you say that?"

Dream held his ground, and looked George in the eyes, "Because it's true, and I need you to know it,"

"Stop, Dream," George hated how his voice quavered as he spoke, "Just, stop,"

“I-”

“Don’t say another word,” George interjected, virulence laced in his tone. He murmured to himself, “I’m so goddamn tired,”

“Of me?”

“I don’t know,” George pinched the bridge of his nose. He should’ve been hysterical, and he probably would be if he wasn’t so tired. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I want. I’m sick of this shitty town, these people. I’m sick of the past weighing me down,”

“Then *leave* . Come with me!” Dream persisted, “Fuck ‘em, fuck all of ‘em,”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have anything to leave behind,” George distantly thought about how unfair this was- talk about an *ad hominem* - but he didn’t care about fairness, “You don’t belong anywhere,”

“But I want to!” Dream retaliated, “I’m tired of living life on the run. One day, I’m going to die, and it’s all going to be for nothing, I - I want it to be for something. Someone,” - George was smothered under Dream’s gaze - “So, what do you say, George? Let’s get out of here,”

It was a dangerously enticing offer. “That’s absurd,”

“I’m ready to live a different life and *change* for once,” Dream hissed, “Something you’re clearly not keen on,”

“Where the hell would we even run off to?”

George didn’t really care about where they’d go, anywhere with Dream would be worthwhile. He’d find anyway to poke holes in his argument and sink this ship so he could justify turning down Dream.

“We’d go to California,”

George raised an eyebrow. “Why California?”

“Why not? I’m not a wanted criminal there, nobody even knows what I look like without the bandana. Shit, everybody ‘round these parts thinks I’m *dead* anyway,” Dream ran a hand through his hair, pushing back strands only for them to fall over his face again, “Ever since the gold rush of ‘48 things have calmed down there. There’s a lot of rural land. Techno gave me property, I’ve got the papers and everything,”

“Okay, so you own property. We’d never make it. Not by stagecoach,” George would find a way to convince Dream it wouldn’t work, that there’s no way they could be together, “The trail is full of bandits and crooks, we’d be robbed blind and shot dead before we make it a mile,”

“We’d go by train,”

“Our things?”

“We could sell everything we don’t need. We’d farm livestock, and settle down,”

“Just us?”

“Just us.”

Just us.

The graveyard went still for a moment, with only the rustling of the apple tree’s branches to fill the silence that the two were unwilling to.

Dream opened his mouth, made an incomprehensible gesture, then closed his mouth. He put his face in his hands for a brief moment, and George feared he was going to cry, but when his hands peeled back, all that was there was the dry, tired face of a lovesick man.

Feebly, Dream started, “Whatever we were doing for those six months - don’t you miss it? Don’t you want to go back?”

George locked his jaw hard enough to shatter his skull. “It doesn’t matter if I miss it or want it or not. Because we can never go back to the way things used to be,”

“Why not?” Dream sounded borderline hysterical, his tone having turned pitchy and overemotional.

“Because everything’s different,”

“It doesn’t have to be,”

“Yes, it does,”

“Why?”

George pointed at himself, and with the conviction of god judging the damned, snarled, “Because I ruined everything,”

Dream opened his mouth to speak, looking at George with those same, pained eyes he had the night he left.

“I was angry at you. For a long time,” Dream confessed quietly, as if kneeling before an altar.

“Why aren’t you now?”

“Because I hated being angry at you. And there’s no value living in the past,” Dream said resolutely as he met George’s eyes, intense and prying, “I want to move forward. But I need to know, right now, if I still mean anything to you. Who am I to you, George?”

No matter how many times George tried to discern Dream’s question, the words fell apart in his mind, like sand between the fingers of a contemptuous hand. “You can’t possibly expect me to answer that,”

Dream made a noise that sounded like he was being strangled. “If you want me to leave, then tell me. Say you regret every second of those six months, and you’ll never see me again. I’ll leave if that’s what you want,”

That’s what I want.

Right?

“But if you want me to stay,” Dream said shakily, “I’ll stay. I’ll stay for as long as you need,”

Please stay.

Please stay.

Please stay.

Dream reached out for George’s gloved hand. He didn’t pull back. “We could have a life together,”

Those six words hit George right in the ribs, and he could’ve sworn he heard them fracturing under the pressure, the implications of that sentence. Maybe it was the way Dream said it so pitifully or maybe it was the fact he thought to say it in the first place - either way the prospect was simply too fantastical, too unobtainable. George wanted to cry at the mere idea of wishing for something so out of reach, something so absurd.

And yet, George wanted it so bad, more than anything else, and that was terrifying. It had been an entire year, and his fondness didn’t waver, it was unconditional. It didn’t matter if Dream was gone for five years, a decade, or a century, George would give it all up for Dream, all he had to do was say the word, and it’d be worth it, if to feel his embrace again.

So goddamn sick.

“No,”

Dream's face fell immediately, his whole posture crushed under the weight of George's rejection "No?"

"You want to know who you are to me?" George yanked his hand back, and brushed it off on his clothes. His voice was low, slow, and dangerously calm, "A bastard, that's what you are," - He took a step forward, Dream took a step back - "A bastard, a criminal, a degenerate, and someone who I refuse to waste another minute on,"

"You don't mean that," Dream sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

"You don't know me," George snarled.

"George, please-" Dream reached out again, George batted his hand away.

"You can't be here," He said for the upteenth time, yet there was a certain finality to it now, "And this time I'm not fucking around. I want you gone by tomorrow morning,"

George envied the blind in that moment, as he helplessly watched Dream's expression contort in agony, a pain more intense than when he was dying of a gunshot wound, "Is this what you really-"

"Yes. I don't need you to fix me and my shitty life. And this probably didn't occur to you, *Dream*, but if I had needed you, I would've said as much,"

Dream stared vacantly. The conversation felt like committing a murder.

As if to drive the final nail in the coffin, George declared, "I don't need you,"

A pause.

Dream balled his hands into fists, and shoved them in his pocket. "If that's what you want,"

And with that, Dream retrieved his revolver which George had apparently dropped at some point, turned on his heel, and wordlessly started towards town. His footsteps sounded like mockery. He disappeared into the cluster of dilapidated old buildings.

Even as the love of his life walked away, George's pride was insuperable.

He glanced at his headstone a few paces away. He felt something that resembled envy as his own name glared at him disapprovingly, scorning him and his decision.

George had made his choice. He couldn't have Dream. Dream couldn't have him.

This was George's fate, authored and signed by his own hand.

He was going to have to explain it all to Sapnap eventually, and now was as good as time as any before the grieving process began. After being locked away in his house all day, George trudged his way over to Sapnap's house that night.

He rapped on the door once before it opened to reveal a tired-looking Sapnap wearing a half-buttoned shirt. Wordlessly, he stepped aside, allowing for George to barge in, not even removing his hat first. George stood wordlessly in the centre of the meager room, not sure what to say. There wasn't much to say in the first place, but the words that were there were pressing against his gag reflex like bile.

Sapnap shut the door. "What're you needin' at this hour?"

"Dream's leaving," George said it like he was convincing himself.

The other man looked apologetic, and gestured for George to sit. He didn't. "I'm sorry, George. I told you he's a no good criminal anyhow, and-"

"I'm the one who told him to leave. I told him I can't have him around,"

Sapnap nodded, but he didn't make eye contact.

George repeated, "I can't have Dream around anymore,"

Gently, Sapnap planted the question, "Are you sure that's what you want?"

Shit if I know. "Of course,"

Sapnap nodded again. "I trust you made the right decision then,"

George wordlessly made his way to the exit, turned, tipped his hat when he was past the threshold, and that was that.

It was barely past nightfall when he heard a horse's whinny accompanied by a string of curses from outside his house. George normally wouldn't have been awake at this hour, but he had forced himself to keep busy. He sat at his desk, still wearing his daytime clothes, reading and rereading the same page of a book over and over. He hoped the words would cut through the noise in his brain.

The idea of trying to fall asleep, alone with only the embrace, no, chokehold of his thoughts, was revolting. His current plan - to drive himself into an insomnia-soused stupor and eventually passing out cold - was far more appealing. His thoughts were his penance.

Immediately after the argument, George was numb. But now, the vacuous feeling in his chest made way for pain, a pain worse than the night he initially left, a pain worse than the subsequent months spent convincing himself to hate the man he would go to the ends of the Earth for.

A horse's neighbor followed by shushing outside cut through his thoughts.

Vaguely, George wondered who it was, causing a ruckus when the moon was high in the starless sky, but a part of him already knew. Carried by his legs moving involuntarily, he threw his front door open, hinges creaking loudly as tendrils of gelid air nipped at him through the thin cotton of his button-up. His eyes were slow to adjust in the dark, but he could make out the murky figure of a man on a horse.

Just when George thought he couldn't get any more hurt, that he couldn't feel anymore broken, the mere sight of Dream leaving twisted something deep inside him. A primal fear coursed through George's veins, a seemingly familiar sensation, but now it felt foreign.

George wasn't the one leaving, he was the one left behind.

I chose this.

"Dream?" He blurted hoarsely, the word echoing through the empty streets.

The man, evidently Dream, turned back to meet George, his eyes morose under the brim of his hat. He looked between George and the horizon, seemingly torn, before tightening his grip on the reins, preparing to flick his wrist. George couldn't let him leave, not now, not when he couldn't even see his face for the last time because it was too dark outside. When he left, George wanted to face him. He needed to.

"I thought you were leaving tomorrow," George said inanely, shouting the words from several yards away. Dream turned away, his silhouette embellished by the silver light.

"I said I'd be gone by dawn. I'm a man of my word," The last part was serrated like a dagger.

George protested, "It's a bit early,"

"No point in waiting,"

"Right,"

Quietude overtook them. The two stood there, George on his porch and Dream on his horse with the world between them.

George wished he went to sleep. It would've been easier to wake up to find Dream had already left. Still, George had to keep the conversation alive as a last-ditch effort. And as stilted and uncomfortable as it was, he felt like he was passing time with a soon-to-be dead man, clinging to the last moments he had. He was preemptively mourning.

"I should be going now?" Dream said like it was a question, raising the reins.

“No!” George jumped to answer a little too quickly, “No. Not yet,”

Dream’s feet fidgeted in the stirrups of the saddle. He said, “Okay,” before guiding his horse to George’s porch steps, not yet dismounting. Now that he was closer, George was able to see how thoroughly perturbed he looked, and the idea that George caused that pain made his chest ache.

“What do you want from me?”

George didn’t have time to unpack all that, not when Dream was glaring down at him expectantly, his jaw locked and his shoulder squared and his eyes flickering with something fierce.

“Will you have tea with me?” George asked, hating how meek he sounded.

Dream averted his gaze, his grip visibly tightening on the reins, and said nothing.

“Please. One last act of hospitality,” George forced a crooked smile, “For old time’s sake?”

Dream’s lips quirked ever-so-slightly as he slid off his horse. Almost inaudibly, Dream muttered, “I’ve never been good at saying no to you,”

It seemed like eons ago when Dream first stepped into George’s home, looking out of place, when in reality it had barely been a week ago. Now, he still didn’t quite fit, though Dream never really fit in anywhere.

He sat at the end of George’s dining room table, changing the position of his legs and doing something new with his hands every few seconds. George guarded the kettle, which was whistling obnoxiously but nonetheless filling the silence, which was both appreciated and needed. Coyotes howled distantly, and George found himself rather envious. Oh, to be the predator of another instead of prey to yourself.

When George brought the other man his tea, it felt like an apology. He set it a sizable distance away from him, as though scared to intrude on his space. They sat across the table from each other, but didn’t speak.

George watched like a hawk as the other man took the first sip of his tea, his expression perfectly indifferent after the first sip. George should've smiled out of courtesy, to lessen the tension, but he couldn't bring himself to.

After an intolerable amount of pussyfooting, Dream finally said, "I like it,"

It was a stupid comment, and they both knew it, but at least it was *something*, at least their final conversation had substance to it, even if that substance amounted to scraps at best.

"I hoped you would," George replied, holding his voice steady so he didn't sound like a bitch, "I know you always liked mint and honey,"

Dream took another sip. George couldn't stand it, the way both of them were being so cowardly, acting like eye contact or a decent conversation would spark the rapture.

George cleared his throat. "New horse?"

"Hm?"

"Your horse," He repeated, "It looked different,"

"She's Techno's. I borrowed her,"

"Ah," George didn't bother pressing further. Techno had given dream a horse, a house, a second chance at living - he hadn't realized how generous a man he was.

George sighed.

"I'm sorry," Saying it felt like suicide.

The two met eyes. Dream inquired, "For earlier today, or last year?"

"All of it?" George laughed at himself dryly, "I wish I could say that wasn't me back there, but the truth is, it was. All of it, that was all me,"

Dream didn't respond as he shrunk back into his chair.

George added, "But I didn't mean everything I said,"

"Like what?" Dream was quick to respond, pouncing on the opportunity like a cat would a mouse.

George bit the inside of his cheek, spiraling further by the second, closing all his doors, locking himself out. "Do you really want me to explain all of that?"

"I don't see why not," Dream had the audacity to smile, the bastard, "Especially if I'm to never see you again once the sun rises,"

Bastard.

George either had to say what he'd been hiding in the ugliest parts of himself for the past year, or Dream would leave. Tough bargain.

For Dream, it was worth it.

"I didn't want you to leave," George confessed. He felt raw and vulnerable in that moment, like he'd been skinned alive.

"Then why did you tell me to?"

"I don't know," George scrubbed his face, the leather gloves hard on his skin, "Maybe I just hoped you'd jump at the opportunity, that deep down, you were always looking for an excuse to hate me,"

"George," Dream said his name gently, it would've been easier to hear if he had spit it out like it was bitter, "You know I'd never-"

"I know. Even before you told me, I knew you would never hate me because, but it was so much easier to think that you did. Because if you hated me, then I didn't have to acknowledge that I..." - George took a breath in place of finishing his sentence - "It was easier to blame you for everything that was wrong with me,"

When George was done with his grand monologue, he felt empty, as if he was deflated of all the air inside him. When he'd started talking, he didn't think that's what was going to come out of him. He felt like a dumbass - sniveling, pathetic dumbass.

Dream looked as though he was at a loss for words for a moment. Then, "There's nothing wrong with you,"

He didn't elaborate. His silence hurt.

Do you think I'm sick, too?

"I think I've realized a few things, Dream,"

"Today?"

"In the past few years. Maybe all twenty-four of them,"

Dream threw him an apologetic glance, "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to,"

"I should. I owe it to the both of us," He exhaled shakily and dug his fingertips into his palms through his gloves, "I can't be around you because I see the ugliest parts of myself in you. When I look at you, I'm reminded of everything I resent about myself. And I didn't know how to deal with that,"

"You know now?" Dream asked, not quite prying. George wished he would laugh at him or punch him. It'd be easier.

"To be honest, no. But I clearly haven't been doing something right, and I need to change," George paused, his throat constricting more by the minute, burning with every word and, *fuck*, why did his eyes sting? "I'm not afraid of you, and I never was. I'm afraid of myself, and I think I have been for a long time. But I'm done. I'm out of excuses,"

Neither said anything for a long moment, marinating in what George had said.

"Dream, when I was saying all that about how I didn't need you to fix me or whatever, I wasn't exactly lying. I don't need you. I could live a life without you,"

Dream recoiled at that, his expression wrought with hurt. Smally, he whispered, "George,"

George smiled crookedly at Dream with bleary eyes and teary, embarrassing red blotches from tears splotched across his face, "But that's not a life I want,"

The words settled in the air like ice freezing over a lake, and both of them were slipping through the cracks. George hated that he was crying, but he couldn't do anything to stop it, so he merely crossed his arms over his chest, sobbing quietly as Dream watched from the other side of the table. He felt like the world's shittiest one-man show, his own misery becoming a performance, a spectacle.

With a strained voice, George pushed the words out of his mouth, the final stretch of his grand confession with the syllables blurring together in between sobs, "I miss you. And I care about you more than I thought I was capable of. And I want you - I want you to be here with me. Always. I don't want to leave you again,"

"You won't have to," Dream looked a little weepy himself, his glassy eyes juxtaposed to his dopey grin.

"I won't," George choked out in a whisper, more of an affirmation to himself than the other.

Tentatively, Dream stood from his chair, the wood scratching against the floor. It probably left scrape marks. George didn't care. George stood to meet him and immediately regretted it, doing his best to shrink in on himself as Dream peered him down from a few feet away. Slowly, he opened his arms.

George plunged into Dream's embrace, melting into him. His memories didn't do this justice - he couldn't have possibly remembered every little detail - the way Dream always placed a gentle hand on the back of the other man's neck, the way his arms left twined around George, the way he hummed softly when George first wrapped his arms around him. Even through his ragged breathing and violent sobbing, George could feel Dream quiver right next to him, his heart beating rapidly.

A small, irate part of George was mentally berating him for being so desperate, for allowing himself to affix himself to Dream like this, but another part of him was reveling in the fact that Dream was clinging just as hard. There was a thrill in wanting, but even more so in being wanted by another. George was exhilarated.

So faint it would've been inaudible if Dream wasn't right next to George's ear, Dream whispered, "Please don't leave again,"

I won't.

We can be sick together.

There was nothing romantic or beautiful about the way George was mewling and bawling, especially not when Dream was doing the same, but it didn't need to be either of those things. It was raw and tangible and *real*, and that was enough for the both of them.

When they parted after what felt like an eternity, Dream gently took George's gloved hand in his own, as if to assure him further.

George looked Dream in his eyes, then croakily and resolutely said, "Dream, if you were being serious, if you're ready to give it all up for me, no regrets, no turning back, then I'll do the same. Genuinely. I don't give a damn about what god intended for me, because whatever it is, it isn't worth it. I say to hell with all of it, but only if you're ready to do the same,"

Dream brushed a thumb over the back of George's hand and simpered, "I've *been* ready for a year, asshole,"

George laughed at that, the sound hearty and full. He could breathe easily and stand upright again, he felt weightless, maybe even a little godlike. He stepped into Dream's arms again, resting his head on the other's chest, hands still intertwined.

"How the hell are we going to explain this to Sap?" George mused, "He still thinks I hate you. Hell, he probably hates you more than I ever did,"

"We'll figure it out," Dream assured, and for the first time, George truly believed him.

Dream was right. The following day, the three of them sat around Sapnap's dinner table, feeling like a juvenile couple asking George's father to elope. It took an hour of explaining, arguing, and convincing, but eventually Sapnap agreed, even if he was skeptical. When Dream stepped out to have a smoke, Sapnap pounced on George immediately.

“You want to do this, right?” Sarnap said in a low voice, leaning over the table and gestured towards the door, “He isn’t forcing you, is he?”

“My god, Sarnap,” George grumbled, “Of course I’m doing this on my own terms. I’m my own person, dumbass, and I’m choosing to do this with my freewill,”

“Good,” Sarnap leaned back in his chair, more visibly relaxed, “I can’t say I understand what you’ve gone through, but do you truly believe that this is what’s best for you? I mean, you said you were never going to see him again, like, yesterday,”

“We talked it out,” George shrugged, not bothering to elaborate, “I know Dream is what’s best for me,”

“If you say so,”

George stood and shifted his weight from foot to foot, “I guess this is where I leave,”

Sarnap follow suit, “Let me get the door,”

George made his way to the door, floorboards creaking under foot at every step. Sarnap placed his hand on the door handle, turned it, then released it. He turned to face George, and in a split second, accosted him with a crushing embrace.

Against his shoulder, he murmured, “I’m gonna miss you,”

“I’ll miss you too,” George tapped Sarnap’s shoulder twice at an attempt to comfort him, “But you can visit us in California. We can write letters. We’ll make it work,” *I won’t forget about you.*

“Man, I’ve been living out here with you since I was thirteen. I remember being your deputy,” He pressed his face against George’s shoulder, “It’s weird to think of this town as anything but *our* home,”

George tapped him twice, “I know. I know,”

Sapnap released George, his sad expression contorted into an artificial grin. He looked like he was grieving, “And hey, if things don’t work out, you’ll always be welcome back here,”

George smiled politely. “Thank you,”

He knew he wasn’t going to take Sap up on that offer.

Sapnap hugged him one last time. George embraced back, but his insides felt like they were writhing around within him. This wasn’t like the last time George left Sapnap, because then, he didn’t know how long he’d be gone. It was different now. Maybe it’s because he knew *why* he was leaving.

Maybe it’s because he had no intention to return.

Dream and George arranged everything in a few short days and made plans to leave in one week’s time, the first week of January 1882. The reality of the situation still hadn’t quite hit George. The idea that he was about to leave the town he’d lived in for over six years still felt like it was so far away. It was like he was watching his own life behind through glass.

In this one week period, Dream started living in the same house as George - though they slept in different rooms. Still, the first time George saw Dream sleepy from having just woken up, with his hair tousled and eyes bleary, the sight nearly made George comatose from how hard his heart pounded.

He had forgotten the way Dream lined up his boots so that they faced in opposite directions, or that he carried tin cups in satchel at all times. Living with Dream again brought with it a torrent of memories, all crashing down at once and burying him.

Luckily for George’s poor heart, he was busy most of the day anyway, declaring he needed to uphold his duties as sheriff in his last few days, blathering on about his honor and respectability when Dream or Sapnap asked.

One night, Dream and George had been sitting outside, watching as stars began to fill the sky like splatters of paint across a canvas. They sat a few feet apart - George loathed the distance, but he didn’t move closer.

Out of nowhere, George asked, “Should I call you Clay now?”

“Pardon?” Dream stammered, tensing so subtly George wouldn’t have noticed if he wasn’t staring directly at him.

“Since that’s your real name,” George explained, “I didn’t know if I should be using it,”

“Honestly, I’d prefer you don’t,”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Dream rubbed his neck, “It’s just - I feel like that part of me died a long time ago. Whoever Clay was, I’m not him anymore, and I don’t want to keep pretending I am,”

“I get that. Not wanting to pretend to be what you’re not,”

Dream hummed soundly. George didn’t elaborate. That was the end of their conversation.

The quiet days kept passing, the two of them slipping into an easy routine. George almost forgot why Dream was here and what their plan was.

The weight of the situation set in on New Year’s Eve, the night before they were due to leave. George had been walking home after a long night of herding drunkards and harlots off the streets, and as he set his hand on the handle of his front door, he realized this would be the last time he was ever going to sleep in his house ever again.

It was such an obvious fact, yet he couldn’t quite process it. He was far from regretful, more overcome with something that resembled the ugly spawn of apprehension and cynicism.

I don’t deserve this. I don’t deserve him.

He reminded himself that he’d be there with Dream, which spurred his second realization, one that struck him like a lightning bolt, rattling his brain in his skull. He was about to spend the rest of his life with Dream, wasn’t he? Maybe at some point they’d have a falling out and go separate ways. It

was either that or forever.

He was leaving the town he'd always known to go live with a man he knew for six months. How was this supposed to work out? How could he trust Dream when he can't even trust his own brain to not destroy itself?

Dream would be there with him. Dream was with him now - he'd know how to allay George's consternation. He'd reassure him and hold his hand and kiss his forehead.

George stepped foot in his house, forcing himself to breathe at a normal pace. He felt as though his lungs were filling with water or bile, but it's fine. He's calm. He'll stay calm.

"Dream?" He called into the house. A burst of wind brushed past, causing the house to creak and the windows to rattle. There came no response.

"Dream?"

Did he leave?

George checked every room on the bottom floor, then the rooms on the top floor. He checked outside, and checked every room again. He repeated Dream's name until it didn't sound like a word anymore, it was the sound of George sinking.

"... Dream?"

Dream left .

He couldn't tell if his lungs were shrinking or if he was drowning, he was gasping for air with every step. He looked down at his hands and they were shaking, or maybe the room was spinning. He searched the house again and tore open every drawer as if that would do anything and he checked the same rooms over and over again but the walls kept getting smaller and smaller every time he looked, everything was collapsing in on itself, including George himself.

Dream left. Dream left me, and it's all my fault. And there's nothing I can do. And I deserve it.

George's mind repeated the cycle. He almost wanted to laugh, he wanted to laugh because he anticipated this, he knew Dream was going to leave. He was going to tear George's ugly, calloused heart open one last time, and leave him to restitch the broken seams back together. It was revenge. And why wouldn't he want revenge?

Dream left, and I deserve it.

In a moment of clarity, the lucid thought breaking through a tumultuous sea of apprehension and self-pity, George realized he should tell Sapnap. He'd call Dream a lying, cheating bastard, and threaten to kill him, and George would laugh.

George made his way to Sapnap's house, clawing at his eyes and flattening his hair and smoothing his clothes with violent hand motions that only made them look worse. He didn't knock, he swung the door open, and all but died when he saw Dream.

Sapnap was seated innocuously at his dining room table, playing some sort of card game with two different decks of cards, and Dream was there because *of course* he was, of course George was the one overreacting and catastrophizing, turning nothing into something.

George stood in the doorway, breathing heavily, face red from his frantic mania and nearly crying. His skin felt cool but his innards were burning him up. The two men stared at him as though he was an asylum escapee.

"Good evening, George," Sapnap waved at him. He glanced over at Dream, who was staring at George like a hawk.

George tipped his hat mechanically. "Howdy,"

"Dream and I were playing Faro,"

"Right," *I'm such a fucking idiot.*

"Do you want to join,"

“No. Thank you,”

“Um, are you feelin’ alright?” Sapnap asked gently, and made a vague gesture at his own face, “You look a little, um-”

“I’m as dandy as a dandelion,” George interjected a little too quickly.

“Right,”

George stood in the doorway for a moment before tipping his hat again, turning, and slamming the door hard behind him. He had barely made it a step inside his house before he heard Dream’s footsteps on the porch. He opened the door, and removed his hat as he stepped inside George’s home.

“Are you alright?”

“I already said yes,” George cringed at how small he sounded, “You shouldn’t have left Sapnap, you two were having a good time,”

“I wanted to make sure you’re doin’ alright,”

“It’s nothing you did,” George clenched his hands hard, hard enough that the leather squeaked in his grip.

“That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t be there for you,”

Through grit teeth, George insisted. “Nothing’s wrong with me,” *What a lie.*

“George, come on,” Dream gave him a look that said he wasn’t buying George’s bullshit, “What made you so frazzled?”

“It’s stupid,”

“It’s not stupid if it’s how you feel,”

“No, really, it’s going to make me sound like a dumbass,”

“You always sound like a dumbass,” Dream joked good-naturedly, which made George crack a smile, “Now tell me what’s wrong,”

George inhaled deeply, and rushed his words out on the exhale like he was vomiting them out, “I thought you left,”

Dream’s reaction was an immediate one, his face falling and voice lowering as he whispered, “What?”

“There, I said it,” George mumbled, “Now forget it,”

Dream paused, lips pursed for a long moment before he asked, “Why would you think I’d-?”

“I assumed that you realized how crazy this whole plan was. That we haven’t had a normal conversation in over a year, and now we’re moving to a different state together tomorrow, and we’re going to be living together, and you probably don’t even want me, and it’s all absurd, it redefines absurd-”

“George,” Dream placed a soothing hand on the other’s shoulder, looking him in the eye, “If you don’t want to move out of *Santa Mariana*, or you’re not ready yet, then that’s fine. Genuinely,”

“I want to, I’m just,” George let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding in, “Nervous. But still, it’s...”

“Better than the alternative?” Dream finished, “Can I tell you something?”

“Shoot,”

Dream smiled, small and lopsidedly, “I feel the same way,” - at George’s apparently skeptical facial expression, Dream added - “Really, I’ve been feeling as jittery as a jackrabbit over this whole ordeal,”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I could ask you the same question,”

“Fair enough,” George groused reluctantly.

Dream took George’s hand into his own, warming him to the bone, “We’ll be fine, darlin’,”

The endearment made George blush, but he still managed to retort, “How can you be so sure?”

“I can’t,” Dream said honestly, “But somehow, I have the feeling that this will all work out,”

George wasn’t convinced, but he’d let himself believe that what Dream said was true - for now, he would allow himself to indulge in a fantasy.

Dream brought his hands to George’s face, hovering but not connecting, as if asking for permission. Blushing wildly, George leaned into Dream’s touch, signaling for Dream to cup his face. Dream did such, and brushed his thumbs over George’s cheeks.

Leaning in close, he whispered, “And of course I want you,” and kissed George’s forehead.

The gesture was so small, George didn’t register what happened until Dream was already turning away.

“Wait,” George said, the word falling awkwardly out of his mouth.

His hand shot out, his leather glove cold to the touch as he caught Dream’s wrist in an unyielding clasp. Dream’s face had perplexity written all over it.

Delicately, as if handling porcelain, George took Dream's hand into his own, his face ablaze. He didn't dare make eye contact with Dream as he leaned down and planted a gentle kiss on the back of his hand.

George rose and shoved Dream's hand back towards him sharply. His gaze snapped to Dream when he chuckled lowly, but the compendium of insults he had been ready to sound off got caught in his throat as he realized Dream was blushing equally as hard.

There was a moment of recognition between the two of them, something about it felt oddly juvenile, like they were nothing more than flustered teens going behind their parent's backs. Maybe that was the case in another life.

There was no time to think about what could've, should've, and would've been, not when George was leaving a few short hours. The plan was simple: they leave at dawn, sell their horses in Tucson, hop on a cargo train, and run as far west as they can go.

He couldn't stop obsessing in his mind, chipping away at it, trying to peek through the cracks he couldn't find. He was drunk with anxiety, irrational apprehension curdling in his stomach.

One sleepless night later, and George wasn't able to find a good enough reason to stay. When he awoke, dawn was emerging on January first. He got dressed, lugged himself downstairs, and barely managed to choke down a cup of coffee, and there was no way he was eating.

Still, Dream was there, comforting him, holding his hand and lightly touching his shoulder or the small of his back when he walked past him. George wasn't sure they had said a word to each other all morning, they merely stalked the halls of George's soon-to-be-abandoned house, gathering the few things they were taking with.

George had already supplied his satchel with everything he needed (money, a change of clothes, and a few of his favorite books). When he was choosing books from his meager collection, he picked up the bible, brushed his hands over the leather cover, and returned it to the shelf.

He looked at himself in the mirror, and the reflection of a terrified boy glared back. Had he always had such dark circles under his eyes? Since when did he have such defined crow's feet?

George touched a hand to his face, then to his Sheriff's badge with a steady hand, wrapped it in a

handkerchief, and stowed it away in a drawer next to his pocket watch. There was no point in carrying dead weight.

He met Dream outside, and he smiled when he laid his eyes on George, moving to take his hand into his own, his touch light, as though expecting the other man to pull away. He didn't.

The sun crawled over the horizon, its rays obscured through the haze of dust. The streets were eerily still. The whole city felt like a liminal space. Most folks were probably exhausted from a night of revelry, sleeping peacefully in their homes while George was about to run away with his ex-ex lover.

The two sat on George's porch and watched the sun rise on *Santa Mariana* for the last time.

Might as well admire it, George thought. He stood and started to stroll down the street, Dream trailing at his side.

"Do you think you'll miss it?" He asked.

"Maybe. I hope not," George kicked a pebble in the dirt road, "All my life here has been unremarkable. I met Sapnap in a different city, and we moved here later. I met you on the outskirts of town. It feels like everything important in my life happened outside this shit town. Feels like more of an anchor, than a home, really," - He locked his jaw - "And now I'm running away."

"You say that like it's a bad thing,"

"Maybe it is,"

The two walked in pregnant silence, through the streets of the near-ghost town. George recognized every building, and he mentally named them off as he passed them. The old buildings seemed to sway at the slightest breeze, as if the whole town was threatening to collapse in on itself.

Eventually, George and Dream circumvented the entire town, and ended up at the bone orchard, the graveyard. The two looked at each other, then back to the hill. With a heavy sigh and a heavier foot, George trudged up the hill as he had done so many times before.

Dream followed shortly behind, and in no time the two men stood in front of George's grave. His name glared at them, casting judgement upon the two lovelorn lepers.

"I didn't bring flowers," George said as though he was admitting to a crime. "I think that's terribly rude of me,"

"Are you offended?"

"Pardon?"

"It's *your* grave. Are you offended you didn't bring flowers for yourself?"

"Not particularly, no,"

"Then I reckon we've come to a resolution,"

"I'm afraid that if I keep running, I'll eventually run out of ground," George blurted. "That's why I'm afraid to leave *Santa Mariana*. I'm afraid that if I keep running, there's going to be nothing on the other side, and it was all for nothing,"

Dream was silent for a long moment. He nodded, opened his mouth only to close it again. He covered his mouth with his hand, eyebrows furrowed as though he was deep in thought. When he spoke, he spoke slowly, as if speaking in a foreign tongue, "Don't talk about leaving like you're running away from something. Think of it like you're running towards something,"

When did Dream become such an enigma? "And what might that be?"

"Whatever you want it to be," Dream paused, "The rest of your life with me, maybe,"

The rest of my life with Dream?

George had all the wind knocked out of him. It was only made worse when Dream turned to face him, and they shared a look of recognition, of mutual understanding.

George rasped out, "Dream," not sure if it was supposed to be a plea or a statement or a question.

“George,”

The air was thick with something more than fog. Dream took a step towards George. George held his ground. They were close, closer than George could handle without looking like a hot pink mess. It was embarrassing.

“Dream,”

“George,”

“Dream,”

Dream carded a hand through George’s hair. George had to breathe manually.

“If there’s something you may or may not want to do,” George swallowed thickly, “I think you should do it,”

“That was pretty vague,”

“But you understood, didn’t you?”

Dream gave a half-smile, “Perhaps,”

“Excellent. Now do it,”

“Well, what if we’re thinking of two different things?”

“Are you going to make me say it?” George grit out, the words coming out strained between his teeth.

“It’d be easier if you did,”

“I don’t tend to make things easy,”

“I know,” Dream said softly, “How about this, then?”

With a quick glance of the vicinity, Dream clasped his hands in the lapels of George’s duster, and pulled him close, their torsos pressed against each other. He pressed his hands flat on George’s chest before sliding up his neck with a feather-light touch, then resting on his jaw.

Their eyes met, and George dug his fingers into his palms as possible. He was clammy under his own skin, not sure if he should be talking or touching Dream because, seriously, *what the hell am I supposed to do?*

“Darlin’?” Dream asked breathlessly, bordering on bashful, “Do you want this?”

George could hardly hear what he said over the sound of blood rushing his ears, but he managed to get the gist. Without hesitation, he answered, “Of course,”

Dream nodded once before craning his neck down and kissing George on his grave.

His lips were steadfast, but not overpowering, and he tasted vaguely of honey and mint tea, the kind he liked. George wanted to laugh at himself, feeling kind of stupid in the moment. The world didn’t end, he wasn’t miraculously struck down, he wasn’t dragged to the coruscating inferno. He didn’t find himself in the garden of Gethsemane or Golgotha or Gehenna, there was no crown of thorns, no Pontius Pilate, no Pharisees.

It wasn’t a guiltless kiss, of course, but the part of him that felt guilty was comparatively infinitesimal to the part of him that relished this, that relished Dream. How could George feel sick with himself when Dream was kissing him so sweetly and brushing his thumb over George’s cheek - his hands enveloped George’s face so easily. George loved it when Dream held him, he would burrow into Dream and live there if he could.

When they parted, George was immediately struck with disappointment and a contingent craving for more. He was left with a desperation, a burning need to make up for lost time, as if his time with Dream was now the only thing that mattered.

George looked like shit and he knew it, with his face red enough to rival a ripe apple and his chest

rising and falling rapidly like an injured animal, but Dream leered at him like he was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"I feel kind of stupid," George finally said, unable to suppress the smile that found itself onto his face.

Dream was grinning like an idiot too, "Well, you are,"

George brushed off the mockery. "That wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be," he mused almost inaudibly, "It wasn't bad at all, actually,"

"You mean to tell me I waited two years just for you to say it wasn't bad? That's it?" Dream teased as he smoothed out George's jacket.

"It was only one little kiss," George muttered, gingerly placing his hands on Dream's broad shoulders, "Maybe you need to give me another. To prove how good you can be,"

George was baffled at how calm he sounded despite the fact he was internally screaming at himself. *What am I saying? What am I thinking?*

Amazingly, he managed to fight the urge to punch himself in the face, and even more amazingly, Dream only quirked an eyebrow before fervently kissing him again.

George melted into Dream, especially when he moved his hands to George's hips, pulling him close. Feeling bold, George experimentally carded a hand through Dream's hair, and was struck with gratification when the other man shuddered at the contact.

"We should stop," Dream said lowly, "Before someone sees,"

George waved his hand dismissively, "Nobody's gonna see. It's barely morning,"

Dream planted a brief kiss on George's cheek, leaning in to whisper, "I promise I'll kiss you plenty when we're in California. Let's get going,"

As George looked back on *Santa Mariana* , illuminated by the rising sun, he couldn't find any sort of remorse leaving it behind. He felt a twinge of nostalgia, maybe some nerves, but that was otherwise it.

George and Dream gathered their things, said their goodbyes to Sapnap, and mounted their respective horses. They took one last look at the town, and left it behind in their dust. It felt anticlimatic, as though there was supposed to be a lightning strike and a grand score accompanying their exit, but it was uneventful and unpoetic.

Everything went according to plan, smooth as butter - they rode to Tucson in a few hours, found a rancher who was willing to buy their horses on the outskirts of town, and stopped at an inn for the night. The two precariously stationed themselves at the furthest edges of the bed as they slept. When morning came, they prepared to leave.

"Aren't you a dame?" Dream praised, watching as he straightened his collar.

"I'm just getting dressed,"

"Well, I think you look handsome as ever," The words rolled off Dream's tongue so easily. George didn't look up from fastening his gloves, praying Dream didn't notice his blush. He continued, "We should probably head out soon,"

"So eager to leave already, city slicker?" George teased, "Makes sense a man from the east coast wouldn't be cut out for the this sort of lifestyle,"

"As if you're one to talk," Dream jocosely threw George's duster at him, "You were born in London, that industrial monstrosity of a city,"

"That hardly counts! My parents immigrated when I was a newborn!"

"Whatever you say, you pommy,"

With a few lighthearted snide remarks later, the two were making their way across town, headed for the train stop. Dream's hand was planted on the small of his back the entire time, a warm and steady weight anchoring George to reality. It was a comforting gesture, but still, George flinched at

his touch every time, without fail.

Dream cut through George's thoughts like a serrated blade, "We have to wait for an opening. On my go, we make a break for it,"

"Wait," George's eyes widened an impossible amount, "We're sneaking on?"

"Well, yeah. It's free and easy," Dream winked, "If you don't get caught,"

"You've done this before?"

"How do you think I made it out west in the first place?" Dream simperd, "What, you think I walked?"

George touched a hand to his face subconsciously, feeling a bit dumb. He hadn't committed crime in so long - he had gone back to being a law enforcement officer during Dream's absence. He was rusty on the whole breaking the law thing.

It all went smoothly. Dream waited until the workers were loading on the last of the cargo before making a mad dash to the first cargo car. Dream forced the door open, gestured for George to run inside, and followed close behind.

The cargo car itself was full of stacks of hay, which made for comfortable commuting - comfortable as it could be for sneaking on a train, at least. Dream moved around the stacks to make for a comfortable place to sit.

He patted the spot next to him, beckoning the other man over. George obliged, and sat next to him. Dream wrapped his arm over George's shoulders, pulling him close to his side.

At first, it was difficult for George to think about anything at all when Dream was so close. Something about him made George's brain feel like an egg frying in a pan. Eventually, his presence became a constant, comforting reminder, and that's when George slipped into the depths of his mind. He pondered on a variety of topics, his past, his future, other psychosomatic bullshit as the rumble of the train serenaded him.

The whole situation still felt surreal to him, as if everything was a little to the left. It felt as if any minute the curtains would close, and it was all an elaborate production, or perhaps Dream would dissolve between his fingers if he touched him, like Eurydice under Orpheus' gaze.

As they grew closer to California, the breeze carried a more potent smell of salt, and the air chilled. When they arrived in a California city George didn't know the name of and didn't care to learn, it was already sundown, making sneaking off the train facile. They waited until the workers were loading cargo on the caboose of the train, and then made their dash under the cover of night. They ran until they were well inside the town, a sizable one with multiple cargo trains stationed surrounded by a number of modern-looking buildings.

They slipped into an alleyway, chests rising and falling rapidly as the adrenaline slowly drained from their bloodstreams. George couldn't remember the last time he'd been so exhilarated or exhausted, yet so light and airy.

He and Dream met eyes, then giggled to one another, as though they'd shared some sort of a joke. When the laughter subsided, George maintained his smile, beaming at Dream without even realizing. When Dream smiled back at him, his grown-out hair falling over his eyes, his face flushed from the assault of the cold night air, George feared he himself would float away, up into the sky, and never come back down.

"You're so handsome," Dream cooed, leering at George with half-lidded eyes.

George would've looked away out of embarrassment if Dream hadn't cupped his cheek. He stared at three pebbles at his feet. "That so, Dream?"

Dream hummed, "You're the most lovely thing I ever saw,"

"You rake," George grumbled, half-convinced Dream was only saying this because he liked seeing him flustered, "You know how I feel about flattery,"

"It's not flattery if it's true, my dear,"

George touched a hand to his face, he was burning from the inside. Holding his voice as steady as possible, he said, "We should get going,"

Dream tapped George's shoulder in affirmation before turning to check the streets were empty. After a cursory glance, he signaled for George to follow him out of the alleyway. They rented a room in yet another inn and slept yet another night at opposite ends of the bed. Their morning was uneventful, thankfully.

It was strange to be in a town and not recognize any of the buildings or any of the faces. Additionally, there was no pressure to be covert, to be on the constant lookout for constables or witnesses, to worry about getting arrested at any moment.

Morning came, and it was as uneventful as the last. The two spoke of their plans as they dressed themselves.

"Where do we go now?" George asked, straightening Dream's collar.

Dream brushed the hair out of the other's eyes, "We'll buy two horses in town, and head south. My property about an hour and a half south, maybe two hours if the trail's rough,"

"Simple as that?"

"I hope so,"

Dream shrugged at George's skeptical expression, and they were off with no further questions asked. They did exactly what Dream said, they found a rancher who was looking to sell some older mares, and they negotiated a price. They bought some supplies - food, blankets, saddlebags, and the like - and rode south along the coast, which was supposedly sparsely populated.

They rode through woods, the tall trees towering over the two men. Mushrooms and wildflowers were peppered across the moss-blanketed ground. George couldn't remember the last time he had seen trees so spectacular or so dense, and although he'd never admit that he was excited over what was essentially a large collection of trees, he couldn't help but feel a little giddy. The experience was otherworldly, in some visceral way.

The closer they drew to the edgy of the woods, the more the earthy scent of pine was overcome with salt and sea.

"I think we're near the coastline," Dream remarked.

“Are we?” George looked around, as if expecting the ocean to magically appear before his eyes, “I guess I wouldn’t be able to tell. I’ve never seen the ocean,”

“Aren’t you from overseas?”

“I mean, technically. But I’ve lived in landlocked states since I was young, so,” George waved his hand vaguely, “I’ve never seen the ocean, I guess,”

Dream pulled the reins on his horse, “Do you want to?”

“We don’t have to,” George replied, feeling some semblance of embarrassment, “I just thought it was kind of funny,”

“It wouldn’t take long,” Dream insisted, “We could camp out here for the night and pick up tomorrow morning. Besides, our horses could probably use some rest,”

George hesitated, then conceded with a nod and a small smile. Following Dream’s lead, they changed directions towards the sea, following the smell of salt. As they neared, George turned unfathomably giddy.

Eventually, they reached an expansive, grassy clearing, one that expanded about one hundred yards in all directions. At the edge of the clearing, there was a large drop into a rocky, precipitous cliff, below which was shore and the sea.

George left Dream to tie off their horses to a nearby tree as he half-sprinted to the cliffside, balking as he took in the sheer vastness of the water. He knew that, logically, it was only water, and a lot of it, but something about standing next to it felt so otherworldly.

The waves were fluid and ever-moving, but they looked comfortable, as if you could curl up and take a nap on them. There was also something intimidating about the ocean, knowing how easily it could overcome you with something cruel and unforgiving, churning right below the surface.

Dream made his way over to George, standing next to him. All he could think to say is, “It’s so...blue,”

“Astute observation,” Dream snickered.

George shoved his shoulder, eliciting a laugh. “You’re an ass,”

Ignoring him, Dream stepped forward to the very edge of the grass, just before the drop, “I bet I could climb down there,”

George raised a quizzical eyebrow. “Yeah?”

Dream leaned over further, “Yeah, probably,”

And in one swift motion, he shucked his duster, and started making his way down the slippery, steep rocks to the shore. George’s stomach wrenched in anxiety and he instinctually dug his gloved fingers into his palms. It was only a twenty foot drop, but *still* .

“Are you insane?” George scolded shrilly.

Dream smiled innocently up at him. “Maybe,” as all he said before he continued climbing down.

He jumped the last few feet to the sandy ground. When George made a repulsed face, Dream made a show of rolling his eyes and called up, “Don’t be such a priss,”

George grumbled a string of curses in response, but with some difficulty and only a handful of heart attacks, he too joined Dream on the shore. Dream helped George down the last few feet - despite his squabbles - holding his hands on the other’s hips to steady him. They both knew it was an unnecessary gesture. George appreciated it regardless.

His feigned annoyance quickly dissipated when his boots sunk into the sand, still damp from when the tides were high. George inhaled deeply, and the cool air carried a distinctly salty scent tinged with fish. The water lapped at the shore a few feet away before drawing back into the expanse of the sea, so far and wide that it consumed all of George’s vision, up to his peripherals.

He felt so small, so infinitesimally small that he didn't matter at all. Maybe it meant that he mattered more. Suddenly, he found he didn't care about the distinction between the two, not when he was experiencing this with the person he loved most in the world.

George couldn't explain why if you had asked him, but for some inexplicable reason he felt the urge to hold Dream's hand at that very moment, so he did. Dream seemed surprised by the gesture, not closing his hand in George's at first, as if expecting him to pull away. When he didn't, Dream curled his fingers around George's, the warm skin meeting cool leather. Dream's hand over his felt like home. George stepped closer to the other and rested his head against Dream's shoulder.

They stayed there for a long while, standing and later sitting on the sand, watching as the waves rolled in and out of the shore. George was completely entranced, but Dream wasn't watching the water.

The waves inched closer and closer as the minutes passed and the sun laid to rest at the horizon. The surface of the Pacific glimmered as it reflected the brilliant gradient of the sunset sky. Eventually, the water grew less magnificent and more dark, tumultuous as the sky darkened.

Dream suggested they return to the clearing and settle down for the night. They did such, Dream helping George up as they scaled the small cliff.

The two gathered twigs, dead grass, well-sized rocks, and sparked a small fire in the middle of the field. They ate a modest dinner, sharing rations of hard biscuits and dried meat.

George couldn't sleep, despite only being a handful of feet between him in the fire. He shivered and trembled like a leaf as the biting night air nipped him through his thin, woven blanket and clothes.

The crunch of footsteps approached, and George turned to find Dream towering over him.

"Are you cold?"

"No," George said, visibly shivering as he sat up.

Dream sat next to him. "You'd be warmer if you stay closer to the fire,"

George stiffly replied, “Right,”

“I could give you my blanket,”

“No, that’s fine. It’s yours,” *And I doubt it’ll help.*

“If you want,” Dream’s voice was quieter and an octave lower as he said, “I could sleep next to you,”

George inhaled sharply, “Pardon?”

Dream tensed, and even in the dark, his blush was apparent, “Forget I said anything,”

“I don’t think I will. What if,” George let out a shaky exhale, “I hypothetically accepted your offer?”

“Hypothetically, I’d like that,”

“Me too,” George absentmindedly picked at the grass. He laughed nervously, and Dream did the same.

“It seems we’ve come to an impasse,”

After a long beat, George leaned in close to Dream, rested his head on his shoulder, and murmured, “I accept your offer,”

The words came out stilted and overly formal and George was mortified at himself, but Dream hummed in response, seeming pleased. It was awkward for George at first, shifting onto his side on the hard, uncomfortable ground while Dream scooted up behind him.

George went rigid, his shoulders rising to his ears as Dream twined his arms around his waist. It’d

been over a year since they last did this in a trashy inn, smelling of cigarettes and alcohol now. Everything was so different now. Not worse, but different.

Dream pulled George close until his back met his chest, and buried his face against his neck. George filled his lungs with as much air as he could drink in, and exhaled, the tension in his body thawed as he settled into Dream's arms. He wondered how he ever willingly gave this up. He was an *idiot* for ever giving this up.

Maybe I don't deserve this .

"Are you okay?" Dream murmured, pressing his hands against George's chest.

"Yes. Thank you,"

"Of course, my darling,"

I don't deserve this.

The thought sat in George's chest like a rock, heavy and aching dully in his sternum. It wasn't like the thought was without merit or reason - and that was the worst, most sickening part.

George almost killed Dream. He abandoned him after six months. He said he should've left him for dead. He told him to leave for the second time when he had done nothing wrong. Dream should hate him.

Maybe he does. Maybe this is all some sort of morbid joke. Any minute now, he'll pull the rug out from under George, he'll tell George he was faking all of it just as an elaborate performance to humiliate him, and he'll laugh at George for ever thinking he deserved to have this, any of it. He'd take it all back - every sweet nothing, every brush of the hand, their first and only kiss - and he'd scorn George for thinking he meant any of it.

George felt sick.

He tore himself from Dream's embrace, wriggling out of his arms as gently as possible as to not

disturb him. The fire burned low, but the bright full moon illuminated the clearing, allowing George to see where he was walking as he made his way to the cliffside.

He sat a few feet away from the edge, and gawked at the vast expanse of the ocean, a violent, writhing inky mass threatening to pull him under. The tides were high now, the water crashing against the rocks violently, and the occasional spatter of icy water made George shiver. The combination of the cold air and biting smell of salt hit him like a slap to the face, the feeling utterly disparate from Dream's soft warmth.

George sat there alone for an amount of time that felt akin to forever, his thoughts dissolving into a sequence of unintelligible emotions, resounding throughout him. Each new thought landed like a rock in a lake, sending ripples throughout his droves of emotions. He was scared out of his skin when he realized Dream sat next to him, having not heard his footsteps approaching.

"Howdy, George," Dream's voice was deep and a bit gravelly from sleeping, and George wished he'd keep talking, "Pardon the query, but what're you thinking about?"

"Nothing," He lied.

"Bullshit. I can basically hear the gears in your head turning right now,"

"You caught me," George gave a dry smile, "It's kind of a lot of, y'know," - George made a vague gesticulation with his hand, "Blah,"

"I'm willing to listen if you're willing to talk," Dream said gently.

George bowed his head, pressing his fingers into his leather-clad palms, and grit out, "I'm afraid that I don't deserve you,"

The other man turned his head sharply, "What?"

George looked over at Dream, and saw the sorrow in his expression, his doe eyes and knit brows screaming distress.

I have to protect him from me.

Ever the defeatist, George muttered, "Forget it,"

"No, George, I-"

"I told you, it's just... blah," He mumbled.

"I want to help you, if you're willing to accept it,"

"I don't want to hurt you,"

"You won't hurt me,"

George opened his mouth to retort, but snapped it shut before he could say anything monumentally stupid, instead opting to wordlessly nod. Tendrils of doubt furled inside his stomach, making him grow nauseous in every passing second of silence. After a beat, the words George had been so desperately oppressing burst through his chest and of his mouth, like bubbles in boiling water.

"I'm afraid you're going to realize I don't deserve you," George blurted out, biting down hard on his tongue after he said it, but if he drew blood he couldn't taste it, not when his face was on fire, "I'm afraid you're going to leave me. Because sooner or later, I know you're going to figure out I'm not... *enough*,"

Dream spoke with care. "Enough of what?"

"Shit, I don't know? Anything?" George laughed dryly, hating that he didn't know how to handle this situation because he'd give anything to get a grip on the conversation right about now, "I'm worried that one day, you're going to look at yourself and ask 'is he worth my time and effort?' and then you answer no that question, you'd realize it'd be senseless to stay if I require more effort than I'm worth,"

Dream's face fell, "George, I-"

"Either way, I keep assuming you're going to leave me eventually because, fuck, why wouldn't you? And I can't be mad at you for it, because," George gulped in air, he was drowning in his words, "I know that deep down, I deserve it. I deserve to be left behind,"

Dream was silent for what felt like an eternity. He reached out a hand, then retracted it. George wanted to scream, *touch me, show me you're not afraid to touch me*.

Finally, Dream said "You know I'd never do that, right?"

"I know. But..." George trailed off, "That's why I left you. I wanted to hurt you before you got the chance to hurt me. And I never even properly apologized,"

"You don't have to," His face was indecipherable.

"I should. I want to," George whispered, "I'm sorry, Dream, you didn't deserve any of what I did to you,"

He didn't meet George's eye. There was a pause.

Dream looked up at the star-splattered sky. "I wish I had a cigarette right now,"

George wasn't sure what he meant, but he assumed it was some sort of acknowledgement, maybe acceptance. They sat there for a while, shoulder-to-shoulder, only accompanied by the crashing of waves and the occasional cry of an owl.

Finally, Dream asked, "Why'd you move west?"

"What?"

"You were born in the east. Why'd you come west?"

"I didn't want to get married... for obvious reasons. I didn't want to be a wage worker in some *bourgeois* factory. Never had a chance of doing a rich man's job, anyway, considering I was a bastard born to British parents," George chuckled dryly, "I don't think I knew what I wanted, I only knew what I didn't. I assumed I'd figure it out along the way. I guess I did,"

Dream hummed in acknowledgement, “I think I was the same. I never really knew who I wanted to be. I just knew that I wanted to be important,”

“Important in general, or important *to* somebody?”

Dream stilled. Unprompted, he asked, “Do you know why I asked you to bury me?”

At first, George had no idea what he was referencing. Their first conversation felt so long ago, when it had only been around two weeks ago. It was absolute insanity. A measly fourteen days ago, he thought he’d go his whole life without ever seeing Dream, and now he was living in another state with him.

“Not an inkling,”

Dream looked solemn. He took George’s hand in his, and looked out at the ocean. Apparently, it was his turn for a confession.

“It was my roundabout way of asking you to spend the rest of your life with me. I was hoping you’d stay with me until I die, so it was sort of like, uh, until death do us part, y’know?” He explained with an uncharacteristic shyness, as if he was self-conscious to be existing at that moment.

“You’re so pretentious,” George quipped, his tone light. He leered at the Dream fondly, with his statue-like features outlined in the moonlight, “You should’ve said that in the first place,”

Dream matched the other’s casual tone, smiling as he jested, “Would’ve been a bit forward, you reckon?”

“As if you’ve ever cared about being forward,” George muttered, eliciting a small, breathy laugh from the other man, “You’re a proper coquette,”

“Only for you,” Dream teased.

George feigned disgust, but he was visibly glowing. It was so easy to slip into comfortable banter like this, it felt like bundling himself in warm blankets after a long day.

When the laughter subsided, the two men held the other’s gaze intently. Experimentally, George

brushed Dream's overgrown hair out of his eyes, taking note of the way his pupils dilated as he did so. Dream glanced at George's lips, then back to his eyes, and George gave a nod so small Dream almost missed it.

Dream cupped the back of George's neck with one hand, and kissed him, their mouths fitting against each other easily, as if they'd done this a thousand times before. This kiss was nothing like their first - this time it was somber and messy and reeked of acerbity. Regardless, George closed his eyes, and let himself move closer to Dream, placing a tentative hand on his chest, as if to anchor himself.

"I'm never going to leave you," Dream whispered hurriedly, half-against George's lips, "Never,"

George had hardly taken a breath before Dream's lips were on his again, warm and steady and sending sparks through his body down to his fingertips. George hoped to himself that one day kissing Dream got easier, that he didn't have a sick aftertaste in his mouth after each time he did it.

On the other hand, he wanted to savor the feeling while it lasted, while kissing Dream was something special instead of normal. Maybe it'd be even better when it was normal, when he could kiss Dream everyday if he wanted to. He could kiss Dream every day until he died. He was allowed to kiss Dream every day if he wanted to.

The thought made his heart clench in his chest. George felt like he was going into cardiac arrest from forgetting to breathe for a good few seconds. He didn't realize he was lightheaded until Dream pulled away, his face wrought with concern.

"Are you okay, darling?"

George cocked his head, "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're crying," Dream said with a small, reassuring smile, and brushed his thumb over George's apparently-wet cheek. The gesture only made George let out another choked sob.

He laughed, despite the tears still flowing down his face, "I didn't realize. I feel like an idiot,"

"You *are* an idiot," Dream murmured affectionately, but traces of concern were still written in his furrowed brow and frowning mouth.

“I’m fine, Dream, it’s just that,” He let out another sob, and he instinctively covered his mouth. From behind his hand, he choked out, “I’ve never been this happy before,”

“I love you,”

George stared at him blankly. Dream looked embarrassed.

He tacked on, stumbling over himself, “You don’t have to say it back. I just want you to know. I love you so much, George,”

George nodded before kissing Dream again, choking down his guilt for not saying it back. Dream didn’t seem to mind, kissing him back fervently, leaning into every small touch George spared him. George ran his hands through Dream’s long hair and traced his fingers down his jaw, and Dream unraveled like a ribbon in between his fingers.

When they pulled away, George’s tears had long since dried. He leaned his head in the crook of Dream’s neck, partially leaning against his chest. George was in awe of how much warmth the other man naturally produced, and he gladly drank it in. He’d always run a little cold anyhow.

They watched as the ocean waves furlled and unfurled, the water coiling in on itself violently for miles. They stole kisses from each other, brief pecks on the mouth or nose or cheek every few minutes. They didn’t talk, but they didn’t need to.

Sleepily, Dream asked, “Do you want to go to bed?”

“We don’t have a bed,” George giggled to himself.

“Oh, come on. You’re such a pedantic ass,” Dream grumbled, but the smile in his voice was palpable. “Do you want to go to *sleep*, then?”

“Maybe. But I kind of like what we’re doing right now,” George sighed contentedly, as if to prove how much liked it, “ ‘Sides, I’m not tired,”

Less than ten minutes later, George was passed out against Dream's chest.

He plucked George off the ground and carried him bridal-style, doing his best not to disturb him as he carried him back to their camp.

When George nuzzled into Dream and absently grabbed at the fabric of his duster, Dream never wanted to put him back down. Despite his tender urges, he placed George a few feet away from the fire, which had been reduced to a few burning embers and plumes of smoke twining to the sky. After a moment of consideration, Dream chose to sleep on the opposite end of the fire, and fell asleep shortly after.

George slept fine, if not a bit restlessly, and awoke to the smell of sea salt, tobacco, and coffee. Rime in the grass crunched underneath him as he shifted into a sitting position, met with the sight of an already-awake Dream boiling water over a fire, a cigarette in hand.

He smiled upon seeing George awake, "Good morning. Slept well?"

George gave a noncommittal hum of agreement, not yet fully processing who or where he was. Remnants of last night's conversation phased in and out of his half-awake mind, memories playing like they were underwater. George wasn't sure he was fully awake, everything was so surreal - the hazy fog blanketing the ocean, the way Dream's cigarette hung lazily between his fingers, the towering trees, their second kiss - none of it.

"You're making coffee," George commented inanely.

"Sure am,"

"You don't even like coffee,"

Dream shrugged. "You do,"

He took a drag and exhaled around the cigarette, the smoke wrapping around his features as if it were grey voile. George coughed on his own spit, letting his eyes wander elsewhere, eventually landing on Dream's small collections of belongings scattered beside him.

He hadn't gotten a good look at them until now. The collection consisted of several leatherbound journals in a range of blacks and browns, the same tin cups he always carried with him, a small pot of ink, a small bag of coffee beans, and various dried foods.

Dream interjected, "Are you cold?"

George was shaken out of his empirical observations, "What?"

"Are you cold?" Dream gestured to George's evidently trembling body, "You're shivering,"

It was true, George *was* cold- having slept by the ocean wearing nothing but a thin cotton button-up and trousers, the mist had soaked through, leaving his clothes clingy and clammy. But it wasn't like he was going to say that and burden Dream. George shrugged noncommittally.

Dream raised his arm with his hideous shawl draped over it - a silent invitation. George hesitated, but stood and made his way next to Dream, settled under his arm, and drank in his warmth. It felt so natural, the way he fit at Dream's side, the way they leaned into each other, the way Dream would turn his head away when coughing out smoke. George could feel his heart fluttering against his ribs like a bird in a cage.

Dream handed him a small tin cup of coffee, holding it from the very top of the rim. The heat probably would've burnt George's hands as he received it if he wasn't already lacking nerves in them.

Dream inquired, "Are you thinking about something?"

"Maybe," George answered into his cup, taking a sip. It was bitter and the grains got stuck in his teeth, but he was going to drink every last bit because Dream made it for him.

"You've been doing a lot of thinking these days,"

George shrugged, "There's a lot to think about,"

"Like?"

George knew he didn't have to answer. Dream wouldn't pry. Maybe it was a combination of obligation or his own want, but either way, he was compelled to respond truthfully.

"My father,"

Dream stilled.

"I'm thinking about my father," George restated, "And what he'd think of me if he saw me now,"

"Oh, shit," Dream breathed, then rushed to add, "I'm sorry, that was crass--"

George snorted at that, "No, no, you're fine. I'm not fragile, or anything,"

A pause. Dream asked, "Is there more?"

"What's there to say? My father would probably think I'm a blithering disappointment, and I don't care what he thinks because *I* think he's a piece of shit for abandoning me and my mother,"

Another pause. "I don't know what to say,"

"You don't need to say anything," George hadn't planned for this conversation and was now realizing how utterly unequipped to deal with it he was, especially when Dream was looking at him with those big, pity-ridden eyes. George couldn't take the sight of it. "And don't feel sorry for me. You asked, I answered,"

Dream took a drag, "I'm, uh, not great terms with my father either,"

What a surprise .

"Is that why you faked your death?" George grabbed for the cigarette, and Dream relinquished it without fight.

"Partially," Dream sounded far-away, "I also knew that it was my only way to get out of Florida. I

didn't want to be a farmer my whole life, y'know? I thought I was destined for greater things, and that I'd suddenly be *somebody* if I moved west," Dream laughed to himself, "What a goddamn fool I was,"

"You got what you wanted, right? Your name's famous,"

"Infamous, more like," Dream lamented, "Everybody thinks I was killed by some sixteen year-old kid,"

"What a shitty way to go,"

"Tell me about it,"

George hummed. "I guess the man in green is no more, huh?"

"The man in green," Dream repeated, more to himself than George, "God, that's a dumb nickname,"

Dream cracked a smile, and when the two met eyes they both burst into laughter. George relished the sound, still slotted snugly beneath his arm, curled up at his side. Dream pulled George in closer, pressing his broad hand into George's slender shoulder.

Unthinkingly, he said, "Dream?"

"Yeah?"

"I..." George paused, realizing he couldn't say what he meant to. The last two words lodged themselves in his chest, gnawing at his heart. He couldn't bring himself to say it. "I'm happy you're here,"

Dream hummed. "Me too,"

For now, that was enough.

George still kind of felt like a piece of shit for it, but Dream didn't seem to mind. They were

comfortable and happy and it was still *easy* , neither of them was asking for more than the other was willing to give.

The rest of their travels continued with ease. The same day, they found the property Techno signed off to Dream: an austere yet charming cabin surrounded by a large pasture.

The house looked hardly lived in and even less finished, as if it was only partially complete before being abandoned. The door nearly fell off the hinges when Dream opened it, the windows didn't have glass panes, and there was no furniture adorning the few, small rooms. There was a hole in the roof, the whole place smelled strongly of soot, and the floors creaked terribly, but it was home for the two of them now, and George loved every dust-covered inch.

It didn't take much time for them to move their few possessions indoors and begin fixing up the place. Dream was surprisingly adept at carpentry and skilled with an axe, so he spent most of his day making their furniture and chopping wood logs while George pretended not to watch as he worked on erecting a fence around the pasture and hunted for most of their food. It was a simple life, but they both enjoyed it.

Eventually, they finished renovations, started a small garden of vegetables, and bought livestock, namely cattle. They both herded cows in addition to performing other forms of domestic labor from day to day, such as washing their clothes or preparing food.

They went to the nearby town occasionally. After a few visits, some of the street cats followed them home, and *of course* they had no choice but to keep them. The cats often lazed around their house, or would disappear into the woods and return with a dead bird or rat as a gift.

Otherwise, the two men were mostly on their lonesome, not that that was a bad thing. It was hardly unusual for two men to live alone together on a ranch, but living far from immediate contact helped keep any lingering suspicions at bay. There were no prying eyes or ears out in the woods.

Sometimes George missed Sapnap, but that didn't make him regret his decision to leave. They wrote to each other often. Sapnap mentioned a new friend of his, a Mr. Jacobs who came from old money on the east coast, but moved to the west in hopes of "finding his own path" - whatever that meant.

George only wrote letters, but Dream, apparently, wrote entire manuscripts.

In their laytime, Dream proved himself to be a true jack of all trades. He knew how to sew, embroider, cook, make furniture, and above all, write. And Dream wrote quite a bit.

He never formally told George, it was just something he noticed after a while. When Dream wasn't busy with the crops or livestock, he'd sit out on their porch, scribbling away in one of his journals. George asked if he could read Dream's writing. He hesitated, but agreed. He produced and sheepishly handed over his first cover-to-cover complete journal of many.

George read all of them. They weren't anything special, not particularly profound or well-written, but George read every word because Dream was the one who wrote them. Sometimes the stories were anecdotes of his life, mostly they were fictional- there was one recurring story depicting as many as five men hunting down their enemy, a hero on a grand quest to defeat a monster. Dream's writing was as sundry as it comes, with his writing ranging from poetry or prose, short and long, finished and unfinished.

One innocuous afternoon, George was lazing in their living room when Dream wordlessly handed one of his journals to George, another unspoken part of their routine. Their hands brushed against one another, George's leather gloves rough against Dream's skin.

"Why do you wear those all the time?" Dream asked, unprompted.

George turned to the marked page. Not looking up, he replied, "I suppose I do,"

"You don't have to, at least, not around me. Not if you don't want to,"

"I know," George forced a smile, "What can I say? I'm a creature of habit,"

Please don't say anything about my hands.

"It's okay if you don't like your scars," Dream said.

Goddamn it.

"My scars are what they are," George grumbled, stiltedly. "I don't want other people to look at me like I'm a freak,"

Dream nodded sagely, and lightly took George's gloved hand in his own, "But for the record, I think you're beautiful, you idiot," - He said the final word as though it were sweeter than honey,

like it was a crown he was placing upon George's head.

George thought about that conversation a little too often.

More months passed. George stopped wearing his gloves at home, insisting that they were annoying and unbreathable. In actuality, he coveted the way Dream wouldn't flinch or pull away when he felt George's bare hands - he'd kiss his knuckles or hold them or brush his thumb against the back of the rugged skin all the same.

One night, they were laying in bed as the sun was still setting. They were talking about nothing of importance, just cracking jokes or reminiscing. At a quiet plateau in their conversation, Dream took George's bare hands in his own, and kissed his palms.

"You're lovely," He murmured against George's wrist, planting a kiss against it, "In all my life, I never thought I'd find a love like this,"

Love.

The one crime George couldn't confess to.

George wished Dream would be furious or vindictive or hostile at him for not saying it back. Sometimes he wished Dream would yell at him, would demand he say the three words back so that George could finally be redeemed for leaving him, so that he could apologize in a way that "I'm sorry" could never do, so that "I love you" could feel Dream's revenge.

But Dream didn't push George. He never pulled the rug out from under him. He kept smiling, he kept saying "I love you" with no expectation of reciprocation, and their life went on.

It got easier every day - both learning to love Dream and learning to love himself. It was a slow process, but a rewarding one. It took time and care, but George was getting there.

Of course, there were bad days. There were times when George wanted to claw his own skin off after Dream kissed him, there were times when he wondered if he had truly damned himself. He couldn't help but look away when Dream was in a state of undress, or flinch every time he saw the scar on Dream's side, the mangled patch of flesh that reminded him of attempted murder.

Sometimes, when he and Dream laid in bed together, George would look down at him and see a bloody corpse, and suddenly all he could remember that night in the desert, the way his bullet connected with Dream's flesh, the blood on his hands, the blood on the sand, there had been so much blood. He had watched as the desperation in Dream's eyes fading to anger to acceptance.

Of course, George hadn't known Dream then. Their relationship was unrecognizable from what it is now, but the memories of that night haunted him regardless. George accepted he wouldn't get over it anytime soon. Maybe it'd take years, or maybe it'd always be an open sore on his heart that never stopped bleeding. He'd have it take it one day at a time.

More months passed. They started venturing off their property more and more. They frequently made day trips to the nearby town, where they'd sell freshly-butchered meat, or exchange it for other goods. George would turn his letters into the post office and purchase stamps, parchment, and other luxuries.

One of their most loyal customers and closest friends was a crass woman born of Irish-Catholic immigrants. She wore her hair down instead of up and didn't bother tailoring her dresses, so they all either dragged on the floor or hung above her ankles. She shouted and cursed and drank among the men, and easily had better aim with a gun than anyone else in town. She was an upstart and young, but swore off marriage. This made quite the coquette, which earned her the nickname "Minx."

George liked everything about Minx - her forthrightness, her crassness, her reckless abandon - and he liked interacting with her when she happened to be in town. They both happened to have European immigrant parents, which was a topic of conversation quite often. Dream didn't particularly like or dislike her, but he'd sit wordlessly and nod along when George and her chatted for hours at a time.

Dream stopped wearing his mask in public. It drew more attention than it was worth. Plus, nobody had ever heard of him, his many aliases, or his crimes in California. Dream was finally awarded the luxury of living as an average man.

It took some getting used to for George - seeing Dream's full face all the time, the way his lips quirked upwards before laughing, or how his nose scrunched up when he smiled. It was almost overwhelming, in a cloying sort of way. Dream would often catch George leering affectionately, and subsequently relentlessly tease him for it. Of course, it was all in good faith, since Dream did quite a bit of leering himself. Looking and perceiving had become a love language of sorts to them, as if to acknowledge one another and say "I see you, and I love you. The space you take up is appreciated,"

Dreams apparently had an abundance of affection to throw at George when he was willing to receive it. At first he held back, waiting for George to initiate physical contact, if ever. Then, as George grew accustomed, Dream stopped restraining himself.

He'd often give George a kiss on the temple or forehead before tending to the cattle, he'd place his hand over his at the dinner table. Guilt nipped at the back of George's mind, scorning the fact that he could hardly offer a fraction of the affection Dream gave away freely.

Sometimes Dream's affection wasn't so tactile. Sometimes his presence in and of itself felt like raw love, as though it radiated off him. More often than not, Dream would awake to find George already out in the field, and he'd spend a few moments watching, merely watching as he went about his work. When George finally noticed, Dream would tip his hat to him, and George would roll his eyes.

"You're such a stalker, you know," George had said one evening, out on their patio, "Always staring. It's creepy,"

"You're easy to stare at," Dream replied easily from his side, and took a drag of his cigarette, the embers bright in the darkness of night.

George ignored his blush, thankful it was covered by the low light, focused on rolling his own cigarette, grumbling inaudibly all the while. When he had finally gotten something resembling a cigarette, he tapped Dream on the shoulder, and leaned in.

Dream knew what that meant, and he put his own cigarette between his lips, and met him halfway. Dream placed a hand on the back of George's neck, as he pressed the butts of their cigarettes together.

George pulled away marginally, but both were still leaning in closer than could be justified. "I remember when we first met," George took a drag, "You gave me a cigarette and lit it like that,"

"After you shot me, yeah," They both laughed. It was funny, in a horrifying way.

George tilted his head to the sky and exhaled, the smoke warming his face against the gelid night air. "I can't believe that was over two years ago. It feels like yesterday,"

“Tell me about it. It feels like we were gunning it off that train an hour ago,” Dream mused, “When was that? Five, maybe six months ago?”

“Must’ve been,”

Dream looked out at the woods and night sky, where the sun had dipped below the horizon and stars speckled the sky, but George was looking at Dream.

Dream noticed from the corner of his eye. “Who’s the stalker now?”

“You have freckles,” George blurted inanely, brushing over the other’s comment. “I didn’t know that,”

“Do I?” Dream touched a hand to the bridge of his aquiline nose, “I had ‘em when I was a kid. Then when I started covering my face they just... faded,”

“You have so many now,” George murmured and brought a hand to Dream’s jaw, turning his face towards him.

Smothering his embarrassment, George brushed his thumb over the other man’s cheek. The freckles completely covered Dream’s face, peppered across his strong bone structure. The softness of the splotches contrasted sharply against his scars, the scratches of rough skin slashed over his features. There was such contrast, yet complementarity; he was a masterpiece to George, though he’d never admit it.

“Why’re you staring at me?” Dream murmured abashedly.

“To quote a dumbass I know,” George’s face split into a shit-eating grin, “You’re easy to stare at,”

“Is that so? That dumbass sounds like he’s a smart and handsome guy,” Dream teased, stubbing out his cigarette on the ground.

George signed affectionately. All too honestly, he said, “Oh, he is,”

The two faced each other, inches apart. Languidly, George leaned in, and pressed his lips against Dream's.

George found it difficult to describe what kissing Dream was like after he stopped feeling so guilty about the whole ordeal, but perhaps the best word was sobering. George became hyper aware of his surroundings the moment his lips met Dream's. All at once, he noticed the way the trees rustled in the distance or the wintry breeze that brushed over the back of his neck or the buzzing of cicadas. He noticed how all of those things paled in comparison to Dream.

Dream pulled away. "It's okay if you're nervous,"

"I'm not not nervous," George replied, "And what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I want you to know, it's okay if you aren't fully," Dream paused, "adjusted to our... way of living, yeah?"

He strung the words together so delicately, as though they were made of glass. George shook his head, "I'm not afraid of you or myself or anyone else. I'm not afraid anymore,"

For the first time, George believed the words as he said them.

He leaned against Dream's shoulder, took a drag, and handed his cigarette to Dream.

I don't care if I'm sick, as long as we're sick together.

Life on the ranch was pleasant and comfortable, as per usual. Their shelves were replete with food, and the hearth was always well-fed. They lived decidedly un-decadent lives, but they didn't desire ostentation anyhow.

There were many things Dream did for George, hundreds upon thousands of minute, easy-to miss gestures or glances or mutterings that Dream would perform tirelessly for his lover. However, one thing Dream did not do was give gifts. The two weren't dirt-poor, but they certainly weren't in any position to spend an exorbitant amount of money on amenities. Maybe the thought simply never crossed his mind, George wasn't a particularly materialistic person, anyhow.

That's why it was entirely unexpected when Dream gave him a ring.

It was in early January of '83, marking one year since the two had moved to the coast. George was twenty five, and Dream twenty-two. The pair had been living and working together with few problems outside of petty bickering. Their routine was simple and monotonous, but they wouldn't have traded it for anything - they had had enough chaos for ten lifetimes.

When George first saw the ring, they had been smoking on the porch - something which had become a bit of a routine for them. One of their cats laid curled up on George's feet. He reached down to scratch behind her ear, and was met with a paw batting him away.

He laughed, and glanced to Dream, admiring the way the sun laid across his eyelashes and turned his freckles into spots of gold for a moment, before turning to look at the sky, the swirl of reds and purples and the painterly clouds. When he turned back to Dream, he wordlessly held out the ring: a simple, silver band.

Dream looked like a pleading puppy, eyes wide, but underneath the begging George saw perturbation written all over his expression. His shoulders were hiked up with tension, looking stiff as a board as he held his breath. George wasn't registering.

"What's this?"

"A gift,"

"Okay," George didn't offer a hand. He didn't understand. He had seen married couples wearing rings before, but surely Dream couldn't mean it like *that*. Surely.

Dream's shoulders slouched. He thumbed over the ring as he spoke, "Um, it's been a year since we moved out here together, well, technically it was yesterday, but I forgot yesterday, but I didn't want to wait another year, so I figured I'd give it to you a day late, so yeah," - He took a breath "This is marking our one year and one day anniversary since moving out here. Can I take your hand?"

As if breaking a trance, George placed his cigarette in his mouth and stuck out his hand. Dream gently took George's hand in his, the calloused pads of his fingers brushing against George's palm as he slid the band over his ring finger. The two peered fixedly at George's hand for a moment, now adorned with the silver band. The smooth, shiny metal contrasted sharply with his scarred, red skin.

George took his cigarette back into his hand, admiring the way the ring glimmered and glittered in the golden sunlight of the evening. "It fits well"

"Yeah,"

"It's pretty,"

"I measured your finger when you were asleep,"

George was still for a moment before cracking into a series of snickers followed by a smile. "You freak,"

"It was much easier measuring you than doing it on myself, believe me," Dream tittered as he produced a ring of his own from his breast pocket - another plain band, this time made of gold.

George's eyes must've widened because Dream rushed to explain himself, "Don't worry! It's not solid gold. It's just gilded. Nothin' fancy,"

George shook his head, incredulous. Dream had gotten him a pair of rings, but surely he didn't mean it, like *that*. "You have one too?"

"Yeah?"

"We match," George stated, "Are we supposed to match?"

"I want us to match,"

"Then we're a match,"

Dream hummed, and leaned his head against George's shoulder. They were silent for a long moment, until they both finished their cigarettes and the moon had crawled over the eastern horizon.

George cleared his throat, “How long have you been planning this?”

“Um,” Dream swallowed, “A long while,”

George couldn’t fight the curiosity bubbling within him, demanding to know how long Dream has been wanting him for. “How long?”

Dream was silent for a long moment, not meeting George’s eye as he looked out vacantly. He sighed, and relented, “I was going to give you the ring for your twenty-third birthday. Before... you left,”

He said the last words not confrontationally, but rushed and pained as, as though he were dropping hot coals from his hands.

I don’t know what to say.

George took Dream’s hand in his own, punctuated by the muted clanking of their rings. “Thank you, Dream,”

“I love you,”

George’s throat closed and his chest ached as it had so many times before. He opened his mouth, closed it, then repeated, “Thank you, Dream,”

Dream nodded, and smiled at him with genuinity, “Of course, darlin’,”

They wore the rings as necklaces as to be more covert. They could simply tuck them under their shirts instead of wearing their gloves all the time. It was surreal how two pieces of metal held so much significance, how by tucking away a necklace under their button-ups, they were shielding their love from the world.

They joked about being married. They joked about trading surnames, about changing their names

to George Langley or Dream Fitzroy. Of course, that's all they were doing, they were *joking*, but George couldn't help but feel attached to the idea of him and Dream, forever and always.

One morning while preparing coffee for George, Dream contemplated, "Imagine if our gravestones had the same last names. One of them says 'Here lies George Fitzroy' and the other says 'Here lies Dream Fitzroy.'" - At George's confused expression, Dream added - "It'd be kind of romantic, wouldn't it?"

George snorted. With affection, he said, "You're sick in the head,"

"It *is* romantic!"

George rolled his eyes. "Dream Fitzroy doesn't have a very nice ring to it. And we probably won't be able to afford headstones,"

Internally, George mourned the status they could never have, a title that would never be theirs to claim. Surely, if God intended George's love to be unfit for marriage, why would he make it deeper than the ocean, or more wide than the sky, or more warm than summer day?

"Well, no, I guess not," Dream handed George a cup of coffee, black, and took a seat across from him at the dining table, "But you'll still be the one to bury me. You can make sure I'm wearing my ring,"

George winced. The thought of Dream dying was something his mind didn't let him think about, thankfully. He could never understand how Dream spoke of it so casually.

"Don't be such a croaker," He took a sip of his coffee. It tasted better when Dream made it. "And what makes you think you'll die first?"

"Oh, let me think," Dream pondered sarcastically, "I've been shot multiple times, I used to drink like a madman, I have a general lack of concern towards my wellbeing... need I continue?"

Obstinately, George retorted, "Well, I hope you don't die,"

"That's impossible," Dream snickered.

"I *know* it's impossible, and death is inevitable or whatever, but... don't die soon."

"I can't promise that," Dream said with surprising solemnity. The air in the room grew cold. Dream added on in jeft, "Besides, I thought you'd be happy to get rid of me,"

"Why would I want that? I love you,"

The world froze.

Dream realized before George, his entire body going rigid as his eyes snapped to meet the other's. George didn't understand why he looked so panicked, until George realized and began to panic himself.

Dream looked like he'd had a realization of his own, his expression shifting from startled to hurt. George couldn't speak. He couldn't explain himself, he didn't even know what there was to explain. What he said was obvious, so obvious he didn't even say it until then.

Dream spoke like he was walking on eggshells. "It's okay if you didn't mean that,"

George shook his head unwittingly. Of course he meant it. Of course he loved Dream. It was all so obvious.

"I did," George balled his hands into fists, his nails digging into his palms, before he exhaled and unclenched his hands, "I did, uh, mean it, that is,"

Dream's expression was unreadable. George's mind was imploding in on itself. George stood tentatively, and Dream followed. They stood across from each other in a standoff of half eye contact and fiddling with sleeves.

How long have I been wanting to say that?

Too long

George beamed at the other man with a brightness the sun envied, "Dream, I meant it. I meant it,"

Dream smiled, matching the other man's brightness, "I heard you the first time,"

"Dream," George took the other's face in his hands. His throat was tight from crying - shit, when did he start crying? Tears ran down George's face as he said, "I love you, Dream,"

Dream didn't hesitate as he enveloped George into his arms, both of them sobbing for no reason at all and simultaneously for everything - for themselves, for the other, for the life they'd worked so hard to earn, for all the "I love you"s George had been too afraid to say, for all the "I love you"s he was yet to say.

He'd missed so many chances, why not make them up now?

"I love you,"

"I love you, too,"

George was afraid of what else would come out of him after he'd said the three words again, but all he did was weep into Dream's arms, his face pressed against the other man's chest.

"I love you,"

"I know. I love you, too, my darling,"

It felt so good to have such a weight lifted off him, to not live as a hostage to his own mind. This was his reality, now. He could love Dream, unfettered. Forever.

"I love you,"

"I love you, too,"

And that was enough.

That's it. That's the grand finale of the series you waited nearly 4 months for! I hope it was worth it.

Sorry if it wasn't! Sorry if you think it's underwhelming or pretentious or sucks in general. I worked hard on this series, so I'd hate for it to fall flat on its ass in the home stretch. That being said, I'm not very proud of this final part, but I'm happy to be done with the series. Plus, regardless of how it turned out, this was a really important long term project for me, and I've grown a lot as a writer because of it. Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed it :)

I'm thinking of posting a fourth installment with two chapters - an alternate ending where George doesn't leave Dream (basically exploring the dnf crime duo), and an epilogue to the main timeline - is that something you all are interested in? I don't want to beat a dead horse by continuing the series, but I already have the alternate ending written + I have ideas for the epilogue, lmao. Plus, the chapters would only be a few thousand words each, so comparatively much shorter to the rest of the series. Idk, could be kinda interesting.

Either way, after the maybe-happening part four, the cowboy au will be no more - a blessing and a curse to you all, I'm sure. I might go on to write more dnf (I've been thinking of a cyberpunk au for a while now), but I also might write for another ship. Who knows what the future holds!

If you have any praise to give me or opinions on part 4, be sure to send me an ask at @wormweeb on tumblr dot com!

Comments and kudos are also greatly appreciated, they inspire me to keep writing!

End Notes

Chapter 2 is mostly complete, and that will be posted within a month (hopefully). It's wayyyyy longer than chapter 1, so that's why this has taken me so long!

If you have feedback/questions/etc., feel free to jabber at me on tumblr at @wormweeb.

Thank you so much to those who've read the fic, your continued support means the world to me <3 comments and kudos are very also much appreciated! they inspire me to keep writing, and they put a smile on my face :)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!